

SUNDERED HEARTS.



“Very soberly Gertrude walked by the familiar field paths.”—Page 15.

SUNDERED HEARTS.

BY

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AUTHOR OF 'ALDERSYDE,' 'CARLOWAN,' ETC.

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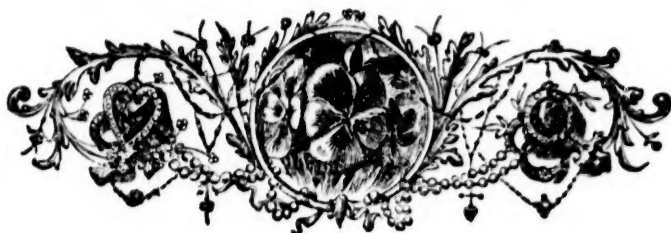
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CHAP.
I.
II.
III.
IV.
V.
VI.
VII.
VIII.
IX.
X.
XI.
XII.
XIII.

I.
II.
III.



CONTENTS.

PART I.

CHAP.	PAGE
I. THE FRANKLIN-MAYNES,	7
II. AFTERNOON TEA,	14
III. THE COUNTY BALL,	23
IV. MORNING CALLS,	32
V. THE STRATHEARNS—FATHER AND SON,	39
VI. FORTUNE SMILES,	47
VII. LOVE,	55
VIII. THE SHADOW FALLS,	64
IX. THE WISDOM OF THE WORLD,	70
X. TOO LATE,	78
XI. HIS PROMISED WIFE,	86
XII. LUNDIE HOUSE, PICCADILLY,	93
XIII. THE MARRIAGE,	100

PART II.

I. HUSBAND AND WIFE,	109
II. CASTLE LUNDIE,	117
III. THE PATH OF DUTY,	125

CHAP.	PAGE
IV. DISCORD,	133
V. UNASKED, UNSOUGHT,	142
VI. VISITORS FOR CASTLE LUNDIE.. . . .	151
VII. BEARING THE CROSS,	160
VIII. FIRM,	167
IX. LETTERS,	173
X. FRIENDS FOR LIFE,	181
XI. JOHN STRATHEARN, M.P.,	189
XII. A DIVIDED HOUSE,	195
XIII. THE SHADOW OF THE PAST,	202
XIV. FAREWELL,	208
XV. WON,	216
XVI. BROTHER AND SISTER,	225
XVII. BEYOND RECALL,	232
XVIII. AT LAST,	239
CONCLUSION,	247



look
and
diffi
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was
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PAGE	
133	.
142	.
151	.
160	.
167	.
173	.
181	.
189	.
195	.
202	.
208	.
216	.
225	.
232	.
239	.
247	.



SUNDERED HEARTS.

PART I.

CHAPTER I.

THE FRANKLIN-MAYNES.

BUT, mother, what is the use of going to the county ball, and what can we wear if we go?’

The question was asked very seriously, and the speaker folded her hands on the table and looked inquiringly into her mother's face. She was young and very fair to look upon, and yet it would have been difficult to say wherein her beauty lay. It was not in her figure, though it was lissom and graceful enough in its girlish curves, nor in her face, which was not perfectly featured, but only fresh and sweet as a daisy opening to the sun. The large brown eyes, at once gentle and keen in their expression, looked out from beneath a broad brow, from which was brushed back carelessly a rather rough tangle of golden-brown curls, but it was not in these either that her beauty lay. It was a nameless something—a power of purity, and innocence, and grace which encompassed her, and made her presence a sunbeam in itself. Reared in a worldly atmosphere, surrounded from her earliest childhood by influences false to

the truest instincts of human nature, Gertrude Mayne had yet preserved her pure and guileless heart, and kept herself unspotted from the world.

The lady whom she addressed as mother—Mrs. Franklin-Mayne of Meadowflats—had been a beauty in her youth, but a long period of feeble health, coupled with the hard scheming and vain striving to keep up the appearance she thought becoming to her station, had stolen the bloom from her cheek, the lustre from her eye, added a wrinkle here and a cruel line there, making her old before her time. She was that sad spectacle of a woman who is ashamed to grow old—her morning dress adorned with ribbons and laces, her dainty little cap perched jauntily on her grey hair, her earrings, and necklets, and finger-rings, only served to make the faded beauty more pitiful to see. Had she been attired in a gown of sober hue, and a comfortable matronly shawl and cap, she would have been a charming and motherly-looking woman, but Mrs. Franklin-Mayne had a horror of anything matronly or aged. She rose from the table where the remains of the late breakfast still stood, and, drawing her low basket chair close to the hearth, she placed her slippered feet on the fender, and folded her hands in graceful ease upon her knee. Mrs. Mayne was nothing if not graceful.

‘Something must be got to wear; what would you suggest, Caroline?’ she said, looking towards her elder daughter, who was deep in the pages of the new issue of *Vanity Fair*. She tossed the paper aside, and rose with a languid yawn.

‘That is not a question which is to be answered in a moment, mamma,’ she said, in a sweet, cool, well-modulated voice.

A handsome and distinguished-looking woman was Caroline Mayne. I say *woman*, for she had passed her twenty-fifth year, and was six years older than her sister Gertrude. But, though undeniably handsome, she was not attractive. Though her face was in the strict sense of the word beautiful, it lacked the winsomeness of her sister’s. It was the beauty of a statue,—cold, impassive,—which pleases the eye, but cannot touch the heart.

‘Seeing this is our first appearance among Rumford county society, it is imperative that we should make a good impression,’ said Mrs. Mayne decidedly. ‘First impressions are

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everything. We have so little time at our disposal. Scotch people give such barbarously short invitations, that I fear it will be useless to ask Madame Dumaresque for three new dresses. Suppose we drive down to Rumford to-day and see what Mr. Macmillan can show us. Mrs. Ellis of Brierlybank assures me he keeps a first-class *modiste*.'

'Has Mr. Macmillan been paid for all the household stuff we got when we first came to Meadowflats, mother?' asked Gertrude quickly.

Something approaching to a frown darkened the brow of Mrs. Mayne.

'Gertrude, my love, when you can suppress your propensity for saying disagreeable things you will have acquired a great accomplishment,' she said sharply. 'Come, Caroline, tell me what *you* think of wearing. I am divided between a pink satin, with a black lace over-dress, and an entire costume of terra-cotta silk.'

'Rather youthful, is it not, mamma?' asked Caroline, with good-humoured sarcasm. She could sound the deepest depths of her mother's shallow heart, whereas Gertrude could only wonder, and yet still love when she could not understand.

'I can wear what most women at my age would look guys in,' replied Mrs. Mayne, with conscious pride. 'I think you ought to have ruby velvet. A heavy, rich material always suits you.'

'I intend to have an amber silk, mamma, if anything. But really, is it worth one's while to dress up specially for a thing of this kind? What is a county ball?'

'My dear, it is the place where *all* the county people meet once a year to stare at and criticise each other, and also to fill the souls of the lesser lights with envy, for I am led to understand that at the county ball there is given to the *parvenu* an opportunity to copy the upper ten. It will be peculiarly so in Rumford, I believe, on account of its manufacturing wealth,' said Mrs. Mayne.

'In that case *we* could wear anything,' said Caroline indifferently.

'Now, there you are wrong, my love,' said Mrs. Mayne suavely. 'The county families in —shire are not to be despised. Consider, there will be Lord and Lady Hamilton,

the Earl and Countess of Devanha, Colonel and Mrs. Graham, and many others. Besides, if report speaks truly, our neighbour, Sir William Lundie, may grace the assembly with his presence. I hear that he is on his way home from India, and that there are extensive preparations being made at Castle Lundie for his return.'

'How on earth do you find out everything, mamma?' asked Caroline, with a smile. 'I might live twenty years in Meadowflats, and never know who or what the country people are.'

'My dear, when you have lived so long as I, you will learn what is expedient, nay, necessary, to know,' said Mrs. Mayne complacently. 'Gertrude, you are very quiet. Are you meditating on your new gown?'

'No, indeed, mother,' said Gertrude a little sadly, and when she turned her face from the window it looked very grave.

'We must get something sweet and girlish for you, child; a delicious combination of lace and tulle, if I can make our Rumford *modiste* comprehend my meaning. I'—

'Mother dear, if I must go to this ball, my white cashmere will do very well,' said Gertrude a little entreatingly. 'Indeed, mother dear, I don't want a new one. It will be quite good and nice if Barrett trims it up.'

Caroline's proud lips curled; Mrs. Mayne smiled. She was inwardly annoyed, but she never showed anger, never allowed herself to feel it if possible, because it was exhausting to the nerves, and unbecoming to the face.

'My dear, you are not long out of the schoolroom, and cannot be expected to have much common sense in these matters,' she said. 'Well, Caroline, shall we say the ponies after lunch for Macmillan's?'

'As you please, mamma. Anything to while away an hour in this wretched place,' said Caroline.

Gertrude, with slightly flushing face, rose and walked slowly out of the room. She was sensitive to a fault, and even the semblance of reproof cut her to the heart. Poor, proud, high-souled maiden, that sensitive heart would prove an infinite source of pain for her before life's fitful fever was past.

She stole out into the hall, took a wrap and a garden hat from the stand, and went out into the clear, bracing coolness of the winter morning. It was such a day as would sweep all cobwebs of sadness or gloom from the heart, a day in which the blood flows quicker in the veins, and the pulse beats in tune with the invigorating pulse of nature. So Gertrude felt the moment she set foot on the terrace. The peacocks, hearing her step, flew to meet her, for every living thing about Meadowflats knew and loved her. She spoke caressingly to the beautiful birds, and, having given them their morning portion of bread, turned her steps in the direction of the stables. She was in search of her father, to whom she ever turned instinctively when she felt out of tune with the atmosphere indoors. Of late there had come to Gertrude Mayne a painful sense of humiliation every time the nature of their life came home to her. Only a year ago she had come home from a Yorkshire school, an innocent, light-hearted girl, glad to escape the restraints of school life, eager to make the acquaintance of the new home which her father had but lately inherited. To her it seemed to be Paradise to be done with London lodgings and hotels, where she had been accustomed to spend her holidays, and to have a real home of one's own to feel interested in and to love.

It was the old story. Gilbert Franklin-Mayne, the younger son of an impoverished family, had been brought up to the idle life of a gentleman without the means to support it, had contracted an early and imprudent marriage with an extravagant though penniless beauty, removed to London, and then endured years of miserable, loveless poverty, hanging upon the skirts of society, eking out slender means by the work of a literary hack. Such had been the life to which Gertrude Mayne had been born, such the home in which she had been reared. Then, when the best years of his life were past, the death of his elder brother made him possessor of Meadowflats, a small but beautifully situated estate in one of the Border counties. It was desirable chiefly as a residence, for the lands pertaining to it were neither extensive nor did they command a large rental, but it was a *home*, and very thankfully did Gilbert Mayne turn his back upon the great wilderness of London, which had been a hard task-mistress to him, and bring his

wife and daughters to the land and place of his birth. To Mrs. Mayne the change was not altogether pleasant. She had a certain position, it is true, above the manufacturers and retired tradespeople, but she was still among the smaller county gentry whom the magnates only recognised from afar. To a woman of her character such a position was galling in the extreme, and her days were spent in scheming how she could better her position and force her way into the front rank of society. Her hope centred in her daughters, or, properly speaking, in her elder daughter, for it had not as yet occurred to her that it might be Gertrude—whom she regarded as a plain-looking, uninteresting school-girl—who would elevate the dignity of the house of Mayne. By slow degrees certain truths had been revealed to Gertrude, and to her sensitive heart they seemed fraught with humiliation and pain. She was thinking of these things as she slowly walked through the shrubbery and up the stone courts to the stables. Her father, however, was not there, and his horse was gone from its stall.

‘Can you tell me where father has gone, Carmichael?’ she asked the groom.

‘Yes, miss; down to Rumford to see about a new bit for Jerry; and then I heard him say he was going to Colonel Graham’s,’ replied Carmichael, with ready courtesy. All the dependents at Meadowflats loved their master’s second daughter, and neither Mrs. Mayne nor Caroline knew how very often Gertrude’s gentle word or entreating look had taken the sting from their haughty and overbearing manners, and made peace when a storm was brewing in the house.

Somewhat disappointed, Gertrude turned away, and, unfastening the chain which bound the big watch-dog to its kennel, went away across the park, the huge animal bounding gleefully by her side. When she reached the further side of the park, she stood still beside the low hedge which separated it from the road, and looked for a few minutes upon the surrounding scene. It was a picture of which the eye never tired, and yet there was nothing grand or imposing, only a peaceful and pleasant country landscape, a breadth of flat green meadow land, then the silver windings of a stream, and beyond that the clustering roof-trees of the town, from whence many tall smoke-begrimed chimney-stalks reared their heads to the

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wintry sky. There were patches of woodland here and there, sheltering some cosy homestead ; and upon one gentle eminence, looking down upon the town, the towers and turrets of a lordly pile, which pertained to the Lundies, of high degree and old renown. Far beyond its wide-spreading lands there was a ridge of high hills, capped with snow, and which looked like the limits of the world. Such was the picture across which Gertrude's eyes travelled somewhat wistfully that winter day. Her heart was stirred by vague yearnings of unrest, her soul seemed weighted down by a burden of coming trouble. She could not understand why she should feel as if her girlhood, her careless, happy, light-hearted girlhood, had gone away in a moment from her for ever. A gleam of sunlight broke through the grey sky just then, and touched the meandering stream, until it looked like a thread of gold. It made many lovely lights and shadows play upon woodland and meadow, and touched with lingering tenderness the girl's sweet face. She saw its beauty through blurring shadows. The mastiff sympathetically rubbed his head against her dress and pushed his cold nose into her hand. She turned and let her hand fall caressingly on his noble head.

'Come, Lion, I am out of sorts to-day. What can it be, I wonder?—unless the sadness which often comes with the end of the year. You would explain it all away, my doggie, with these wise eyes of yours. Come, you and I will have a scamper together down to the Running Burn, and then we will go home.'





CHAPTER II

AFTERNOON TEA.

LUNCHEON was on the table at Meadowflats punctually at half-past one. It had been ordered half an hour earlier to allow the ladies ample time to drive to and from Rumford before the early darkness fell. Mr. Mayne was not home in time, and the mother and daughters partook of it alone.

'Are you coming with us, Gertrude?' asked Mrs. Mayne.

'I think not, mamma; but I will walk across the fields to Rumford, as I want to see Margaret Dunsyre; and, if you could tell me when your business would be concluded at Macmillan's, I could meet you there and drive home with you,' replied Gertrude.

Caroline shrugged her shoulders.

'I can't understand what you see to charm you in that prim, old-maidish sister of Doctor Dunsyre's,' she said slightly.

'It is most unaccountable the *penchant* Gertrude has for that kind of people,' said Mrs. Mayne. 'Doctor Dunsyre is a gentleman and a skilful physician, but his sister'— An expressive grimace concluded Mrs. Mayne's speech.

'Well, child, if that is your plan, you can just sit with Miss Dunsyre till we call for you; but don't, I implore you, say anything about us coming, as she will drag us in to afternoon tea, which I particularly hate, except in *déshabillé* in my own dressing-room.'

‘Why do you speak of Margaret Dunsyre as that kind of people, mother?’ asked Gertrude a little quickly. ‘Her mother was a Carter of Craigerook, and they are as old a family as ours.’

‘My dear, her mother married a manufacturer, and thus lost her own position for ever. There is nothing worse for a woman than to marry beneath her; it is a social sin. You will see that from hence the Dunsyres will degenerate, until possibly they may be reduced to the level of mechanics. I have seen it over and over again. It is one of Nature’s relentless laws.’

Mrs. Mayne delivered her speech with great dignity, but to poor Gertrude her logic did not seem very clear. And yet she should be learning her lesson now, for it was repeated in her ears many times a-day. She held her peace, and went away quietly to dress for her walk, pondering certain things in her mind. She was unworldly enough still to prize a true friend wheresoever she found that priceless jewel, and her heart was knit to Margaret Dunsyre in the bonds of a true and affectionate love. She was her confidante, her counsellor, her comforter; into that faithful ear were poured all her difficulties and doubts, all her soreness of heart and bitter regrets over the false and miserable life they led at Meadowflats. She breathed shamefacedly to Margaret about tradespeople coming to demand their dues, and how some had refused to supply goods unless the lady of Meadowflats could come to them with her money in her hand. And faithful Margaret sympathized and tried to console, and did not say that she knew all about it already, for the poverty and the debt of Meadowflats was the town talk of Rumford.

Very soberly Gertrude walked by the familiar field paths to the town, pausing for a moment, as was her wont, to watch the rapid flow of the Running Burn, and to wonder why, when it turned the wheels of so many great factories, it yet kept its depths as clear as crystal, and as untroubled as the silent waters of a lake. That was the secret of the Running Burn. Twenty minutes brought her to the entrance to the town. The road took many a winding turn, crossed the burn twice, and entered the town by the ‘high end,’ as it was called, so that Gertrude was in the High Street before the ponies crossed the second bridge.

It was, like other principal streets in a country town, long and straggling, goodly dwelling-houses and poorer tenements standing side by side, plenty of shops of the strictly provincial type, the town hall and public buildings, the bank, and the three churches, all within sight of each other. The mills were lower down, nearer the banks of the Running Burn. The high end of Rumford was the well-to-do portion of the town, and here dwelt those who, from lack of means or inclination, had not built themselves new and glittering mansions at a respectable distance from the town. Doctor Dunsyre's house was a plain, two-storey, unpretending-looking building next door to the bank. Many wondered that he did not follow the example of the wealthier manufacturers and retire to the outskirts of the town, but David Dunsyre held that the house which for five-and-twenty years had been good enough for his father and mother was good enough for him. It was endeared to him and to his sister by many memories which never linger in the halls and corridors of a new house. They were old-fashioned people, thoroughly conservative in their home life and surroundings, and so Number 21 High Street continued to be known as the Doctor's house. The younger Miss Mayne was often there. She was, with one exception, the most frequent visitor to the Dunsyres.

'Is Miss Dunsyre at home, Sarah?' she inquired pleasantly, when the housemaid answered her knock.

'Yes, miss; in the drawing-room, miss,' replied Sarah, knowing she did not require to escort Miss Mayne there and formally announce her name.

The Doctor kept two servants, sober, middle-aged women, who had served in the house since their girlhood, and who were friends as well as servants. But Margaret Dunsyre was the pattern of mistresses, and the wheels of her domestic machinery moved without a jar or a stoppage from one year's end to the other. Miss Mayne ran lightly up the oak staircase, and, with a quick tap at the door, entered the room. A pleasant place to look at, or to sit down in, was the Doctor's drawing-room that winter day. It was an old-fashioned room, with an exquisitely-carved oak ceiling and panels round the walls. The space above the panelling was painted a neutral shade of green, against which the few choice water-colours

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showed to the best advantage. I could not describe its furnishings. The chairs and tables were quaint, and of various designs. The prim housewife who likes everything to match would have been horrified at the incongruous gathering of odd nicknacks; yet the whole was pleasing to the eye, and in the ruddy glow of the firelight looked a very ideal of comfort and quiet luxury. Margaret Dunsyre rose from the window, where she was trying to do some delicate fancy-work by the fading light. When she saw who her visitor was she put it all down, and, advancing to Gertrude, took both her hands in her warm, kindly clasp. They did not kiss each other. Margaret Dunsyre was not one who could caress, and fondle, and speak endearing words to all her feminine acquaintances. She had the reputation of being stiff, and proud, and reserved, whereas she had only a little more common sense and self-respect than many others.

'My dear, I was thinking of you. Come away,' she said, in her clear, pleasant tones. 'Take off your hat and gloves. I believe Sarah will have the kettle boiling now. Do you know it is a week since you were here?'

'Is that all? I thought it a much longer time,' said Gertrude, and tossed off her gloves. Standing together in the subdued blending of firelight and daylight, these two presented an odd contrast to each other. Margaret Dunsyre was tall, and her figure was perfect in every line and curve. Her face was rather sharply featured, her mouth firm and yet tender, her eyes blue and rather piercing, her hair fair, and coiled in heavy plaits round her head. It was a face full of repose; not beautiful, nor very expressive, except when she smiled, and then it was as if the sun shone upon it, lighting up every curve of lip, and cheek, and brow. Her dress was severely simple, a dark blue serge trimmed with braid, a linen collar, and cuffs turned back from her white wrists, and fastened with links of gold, which were her only ornament. Her hands were very beautiful—long and shapely, with tapering fingers and delicately tinted nails. Altogether Margaret Dunsyre was a striking-looking woman. Gertrude Mayne looked very girlish beside her, and to the careless observer, perhaps, very uninteresting also.

'Are you very doleful to-day, Gertrude? Shall I stir the

fire, or tell Sarah to put in a double quantity of tea, or what shall I do for you?' asked Margaret a little banteringly, for she saw that her friend was out of sorts.

'Neither of these. Sit down, Margaret, and let me lay my head on your knee; it is so comforting. There, that will do very nicely. Now, I am very cross to-day.'

'So I saw when you came in. What has ruffled my bird's plumage to-day?'

'Nothing particular, but I believe it was the county ball. Are you going?'

'Yes, dear; David and I always go. But what is there in the thought of a dance to trouble you?'

'Nothing in that, and I dearly love dancing when one's partner is not *too* awkward; but it is the old thing, Margaret. Mother and Caroline are at Macmillan's to-day, seeing about new dresses. They are to call here for me. Why, is that your brother's voice?' said Gertrude, starting up. 'Will he come here? How provoking of him to interrupt us just when I asked you all to myself for a little!'

'Yes, it is David; and I think there is some one with him, for I hear a double footstep on the stair,' replied Margaret, rising as she spoke. She turned her head a little away from her friend, perhaps to hide the faint bloom, like the blush of a pink-lipped shell, which stole unawares to her cheek. It had faded again, however, when the gentlemen entered the room.

Doctor Dunsyre came first, and was easily recognisable by his striking resemblance to his sister. Like her he was tall and fair, with the same clear-cut features and piercing blue eyes. He was a handsome and even distinguished-looking man. His companion was tall also, but of very different physique. His shoulders were broad and muscular, suggestive of giant strength. His fine head was firmly set, and made to look somewhat large by the abundance of his curling brown hair. It was closely cropped, too, but the curls were visible still. His face—how shall I describe it? Picture a face which gives you the impression of strength, and manliness, and purity, and true-heartedness, and you have John Strathearn's before you. His eyes were grey, and as tender and winning in their expression as a woman's; his mouth, apt

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in repose to look stern and haughty, was transfigured at that moment by the sunny smile with which he advanced to greet Margaret Dunsyre.

'I met this brother of yours on my way to the stables for my horse, and he inveigled me with the promise of a cup of your famous Indian. Am I to have it?' he said, in his deep but clear and pleasant tones.

'Surely, John. Mr. Strathearn—Miss Gertrude Mayne,' said Margaret, turning to her friend. The two thus placed upon the footing of acquaintances bowed to each other; then Gertrude, without rising, shook hands with Doctor Dunsyre.

At that moment Sarah brought in the tea-tray, and Miss Dunsyre took her place at the little gipsy table. She looked well there, the graceful and womanly occupation was most becoming to her. Doctor Dunsyre stood by the sofa talking to Miss Mayne, while John Strathearn came to Margaret's side to assist her in filling the cups.

'And how has the world being using you, Marguerite?' he asked teasingly.

They were like brother and sister, these two. They had been as such since very babyhood. Together they had sat on the form at Miss Boston's Kindergarten, an institution which had found much favour in the eyes of Rumford mothers twenty years before, but which had been superseded by a new and fashionable boarding-school, conducted by a German lady and her two plain-looking but accomplished Frauleins. Together also they had played on half holidays and Saturday afternoons, either in the High Street garden or the wide park of John's home at Redlands. They were like brother and sister still, and there was no formality or stiffness between them. To John Strathearn, sisterless and brotherless as he was, the friendship of Margaret Dunsyre had been in all respects an unspeakable blessing all these years. And she—But we will see hereafter.

'The world has never been anything but kind to me, as it has been to you, John,' Margaret made answer. 'Is your father well?'

'Fairly so; but I know the old man's failing,' said John, and his face grew grave almost to sadness. Great and wonderful was the bond of love between old John Strathearn and his

one son. It had lost none of the strength and beauty which had touched so many hearts when Redlands first became a motherless home, and that was when young John went to the Kindergarten in a white blouse and with a band of black ribbon round his hat.

'It is the fall of the year, and you know he always seems to fail then,' said Margaret softly. For it had been in November that the gentle mistress of Redlands had gone home.

'Ay, ay, I wish it was the spring,' said John, and, taking the cup from Margaret's hand, he carried it to Gertrude.

Then he took his own, and, leaning his arm on the mantel, sipped it leisurely, looking keenly and critically at the face of Gertrude Mayne. He had seen her before, but hitherto he had had no opportunity of studying her face. And it was worth studying, chiefly because of its promise for the future.

'I was trying to induce David to give a course of lectures on sanitary reform in the Town Hall, Margaret,' he said presently, just as if that had been occupying his thoughts. 'Our Rumford Town Council require a little light on that subject gently infused into their minds.'

'And what did David say to that?' asked Margaret.

'He advised John to enter the Council himself, and set the sanitary affairs of the burgh to rights,' said the Doctor drily. 'It is not a lecture which will cause the light to break upon their rather—ahem—obtuse minds.'

'I should not like to begin my public life in Rumford Council Chamber,' said John as drily.

'You have aspirations, sir. "Shun ambition; by that sin fell the angels!"' quoted Margaret, with a smile.

'You would rather have me try humility, young ambition's ladder—eh?' said John. 'But I could not stand the vulgar and petty squabbles of a Town Council. What made me plead for the sanitary lectures was a pilgrimage I had to the Watergate to-day in search of one of our sick hands, and, unless I had seen it, I could not have believed that such wretched and disgraceful hovels shelter some of our inhabitants. Even in the clear, cold air to-day there was a feeling of plague in the atmosphere which almost sickened me. It is time something was done, or the summer will witness the outbreak of some pestilential epidemic.'

'Oh, I know! I have seen it, Mr. Strathearn!' exclaimed Gertrude, with flushing cheek and kindling eye. 'I go sometimes to see some poor people in the Watergate, and I have often had a sore heart over it. Do you think anything could be done to give them better houses to live in, purer air to breathe?'

'It could be done, Miss Mayne, if any could be found sufficiently interested in their fellow-creatures to begin the good work, and urge others to lend a helping hand,' said John gravely.

'But would they appreciate it?' asked Margaret, in her common-sense way. 'I believe many of these people are like the proverbial pig who preferred to wallow in the mire.'

'It might be worth the trial,' said John.

'I think so,' said Gertrude, still with enthusiasm, which lighted up both her face and her manner. 'How glorious to have plenty of money, and to be the one who could sweep away all these miserable places, and build comfortable and wholesome dwellings in their stead!'

'You are quite a reformer, Miss Mayne,' said John, with a smile, and his eyes, as they rested on the girl's flushed, eager face, had a something in them, a gleam of interest—I had almost written tenderness—which was not often seen in their depths.

'Who has a greater, more widespread influence than Strathearn of the Earn Mills?' asked the Doctor banteringly.

'And who so frequently called upon to make use of both, my David?' said John. 'But the Watergate scheme deserves consideration at the hands of the Town Council. I must lay hands on our Provost, and interest him therein. Well, I must be off. When it gets dark you know my father begins to weary for my return.'

'You are a most devoted son, John,' said Margaret, rising to bid him good-bye.

'I have a most devoted father,' was John's answer. 'When are you and David coming to Redlands?'

'Some day soon, tell Mr. Strathearn, to see his new fernery. I am quite curious about it.'

'I'll tell him so; it will please him,' said John. 'Good-bye, Miss Mayne, and I would hope that some day you will see

the desire of your heart an accomplished fact in the Water-gate of Rumford.'

He held the small hand a moment closely in his own, bent his earnest eyes on the sweet, girlish face, and carried the memory of it with him to his home.

'I have often heard of Mr. Strathearn, Margaret, and of the good he does,' said Gertrude, when the gentleman left the room. 'But I never fancied he would be like that.'

'Do you like him?' Margaret asked, and somehow her voice sounded cold.

'I don't know; I have never thought about it. He seems very good and noble,' answered Gertrude simply. 'I hear the phaeton at the door. Thank you for all your kindness, dear Margaret. Will you come down to see mamma and Caroline?'

'No, dear. Here is Sarah; she will take you down. Good-bye. Come again soon,' said Margaret, and they shook hands again. When she was left alone she stood on the hearthrug with her beautiful hands lightly clasped before her, and her eyes fixed on the dancing flames. There was something in her heart which had not hitherto found a place there—a vague feeling of jealousy, of pain, of deep unrest. She did not know what had brought it there. She had never allowed herself to face the fact that her heart was wholly given to John Strathearn, in a love which makes the bane or blessing of a woman's life. She could not face it yet, but the day was coming—oh, very soon!—when the truth must come home to her heart.

The Meadowflats ponies were driven rapidly up the High Street, for the dusk was changing to darkness now. As they passed out of the town they met a gentleman on horseback, who lifted his hat courteously as they passed.

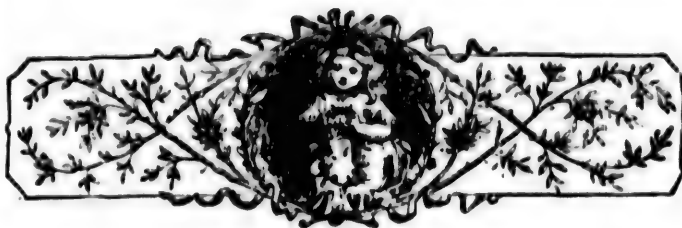
'Who is that, and why does he recognise us?' asked Mrs. Mayne sharply.

'That is Mr. Strathearn of Redlands, mother. I met him to-day in Margaret's,' answered Gertrude.

'Indeed?' said Mrs. Mayne carelessly. 'He looks wonderfully well, and would almost pass for a gentleman.'



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CHAPTER III.

THE COUNTY BALL.

THE night of the county ball was always one of interest and unusual stir in Rumford. The dwellers in the High Street were early on the look-out from their windows to count and try to recognise the different carriages as they rolled up to the doors of the Assembly Rooms. At the entrance itself there was a barricade erected, and a strip of crimson carpet stretched across the pavement to the kerb-stone. Without the barricades was gathered the usual motley throng of loungers from the lower parts of the town, lured thither by the brilliant lights and the chance of seeing the gay dresses and sparkling jewels of the ladies. Their remarks thereon were varied and characteristic; some of them not very fitted for ears polite. Dancing was announced to commence at nine o'clock, but for an hour after that carriages continued to set down their fair burdens at the Rooms. Many of the county people were late, and it was twenty minutes past ten when a hired carriage whirled rapidly up the High Street, and stopped at the brilliantly-lighted entrance.

From it alighted Mr. and Mrs. Franklin-Mayne of Meadow-flats and their two daughters. Mrs. Mayne had a meaning for this late arrival; she had learned by experience that to enter with the throng means obscurity and oblivion for a part of the evening, and she knew that both she and her daughters

would attract attention now. She was right. She arrived most opportunely, just after the conclusion of a valse, from which the ladies had gladly sought rest and breathing space on the velvet-covered seats which lined the walls. Mrs. Mayne's sharp eyes travelled round the room until they reached the charmed circle which closed about the Countess of Devanha, Lady Hamilton, the Hon. Mrs. Moredun, and other titled and aristocratic dames. Then she sailed up the long room, followed by her daughters, and intruded herself with the sweetest smiles upon them.

Oblivious of cold looks and expressive shrugs, she elbowed her way to the Countess's side, effusively shook hands, and introduced her daughters.

Lady Devanha, whose dark southern beauty was enhanced by her splendid attire, looked critically at Caroline Mayne's exquisite loveliness, and with a cold word of greeting turned her back upon the three. She was eclipsed by the fair daughter of Meadowflats, and henceforth there would be war between them. The Hon. Mrs. Moredun—a kindly, garrulous old lady, who had not yet outlived her passion for gaiety—took pity on the somewhat chagrined Mrs. Mayne, and made room for her at her side.

'You did well to come late, Mrs. Mayne,' she whispered approvingly. 'Your daughters will be the undoubted belles of the evening. I hardly know which to admire most.'

Mrs. Mayne beamed all over.

'So good of you to say so, dear Mrs. Moredun,' she said pensively. 'Of course I am proud of my girls—any mother would.'

'You ought to educate the elder one to show a little more animation, dear. That statuesque manner will kill her as a success in society. Gentlemen cannot bear it. Some pretty dresses here to-night. What could be lovelier than that blue gown of Miss Dunsyre's? Until your daughter came admiration was divided between the Countess and the Doctor's sister.'

'She looks well. Who is that distinguished-looking man at her side?'

'That is young Strathearn of Redlands and of the Earn Mills—a fine fellow. I like him immensely. They say they

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are to make a match of it—a handsome, well-matched pair, eh?’

‘Yes. Where is the Earl to-night?’

‘Gone out in the dumps because Sophia refused to dance with him. He is very jealous, poor man, and his pretty wife tries him sorely.’

‘Ah, there he is! and—can I believe my eyes?—Sir William Lundie of Castle Lundie with him!—an unexpected acquisition to the assembly. They are coming this way.’

With intense interest Mrs. Mayne’s eyes rested upon the face and figure of Sir William Lundie. He was tall, and of spare and slender build. His face was sharply featured, and sallow in hue, his eyes black as sloes, and somewhat restless in their expression. His long, thin mouth was partially hidden by a heavy moustache, iron-grey like the heavy hair which was brushed back from a high, narrow forehead. Before he was half-way up the room, Mrs. Mayne had taken in all these details, and decided to make Caroline Lady Lundie.

Mrs. Moredun rose at Sir William’s approach, and greeted him very kindly, for she had been one of his early friends.

‘You went away a lad, William,’ she said somewhat sadly, ‘and you have come back a middle-aged man, which makes me very old indeed.’

‘Mrs. Moredun will never grow old,’ said Sir William, with bland yet indolent flattery.

She drew back slightly, and shook her head. ‘Don’t speak like that to me, William,’ she said. ‘Remember I was your mother’s friend. Now allow me to introduce you to Mrs. Franklin-Mayne of Meadowflats.’

Sir William bowed first to the mother and then to the beautiful daughter.

‘Although I have not the privilege of being an old friend, allow me to bid you welcome home,’ said Mrs. Mayne, in her sweetest tones. ‘Believe me, we have often looked across to Castle Lundie, and longed for our neighbour’s return.’

‘You are very good,’ said Sir William, with all that languid and cynical indifference which so frequently characterizes the Anglo-Indian. Then he looked somewhat expectantly at the younger ladies at Mrs. Mayne’s side. She hastened to intro-

duce her daughters, but if the vision of Caroline's beauty made any impression on Sir William he hid it well. Strangely enough, his second glance was bestowed on the sweet, girlish face of Gertrude, and when the strains of a dreamy waltz sounded through the room, he turned to her with a low bow.

'May I have the pleasure, Miss Gertrude?' he said, in suave, well-modulated tones.

'Thank you, Sir William, but I do not care for waltzing,' answered Gertrude hesitatingly, and with slightly flushing face.

'Nonsense, my love,' said Mrs. Mayne a trifle sharply; 'you ought to be flattered that Sir William should choose you as a partner in his first dance at home.'

Sir William smiled slightly, and his lips, hidden by the drooping moustache, curved in amused scorn. His Indian life had made him very familiar with Mrs. Mayne's type of womanhood. He still held his arm towards Gertrude, and with face still more painfully flushed she laid her finger-tips lightly upon it, and they joined the dancers.

A proud and happy woman was Mrs. Mayne as she saw the glances of astonishment and admiration which followed the pair. She saw the Countess bite her lips, and knew the sight was not pleasant to *her*. Though astonished that the Baronet should have passed Caroline by, she could not but admit that never had Gertrude looked so well. The lissom figure in its flowing white, the dainty throat and arms, hidden yet revealed by the delicate lace about them, the grave, sweet face, the earnest, truthful eyes, and, above all, the girlish innocence and grace which encompassed her, made Gertrude Mayne a pleasant sight to see.

'Is this your first ball, Miss Gertrude?' asked Sir William as they joined the dance.

'My first in Scotland. I have been to dancing parties in London, but never before to a public ball,' Gertrude answered.

'And what impression has it made upon you?'

'I do not know; we had just come when you entered. But I have never cared for dancing.'

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music and the brilliance of a scene like this,' said Sir William gallantly, and looking down with undisguised admiration in the sweet face so near his shoulder.

It flushed deeply under that gaze, and she slightly drew herself up.

'Kindly do not speak to me in that strain, Sir William. I do not like it,' she said simply and clearly.

'Forgive me. I have been taught by experience to believe that all women like pretty speeches. I shall not offend again, only I spoke the simple truth,' said he, with earnestness.

'Thank you. Will you kindly take me to mamma now, Sir William? I am not much used to waltzing, and I am giddy already.'

'I hope I have not tired you. In my enjoyment I forgot to think of your comfort,' he said kindly. 'You dance perfectly.'

'Do you think so? I always fancied myself very awkward,' answered Gertrude, without the slightest affectation, and presently she was again at her mother's side. Sir William stationed himself beside her, until the Countess playfully tapped his arm with her fan.

'Has Sir William Lundie not a word for his old friend Sophia Lestrangle?' she said, in her silver-sweet tones. 'Have old Calcutta days faded altogether from your memory?'

'There are some things it may be wise to forget, Lady Devanha,' he answered banteringly. 'Will you honour me?'

'Willingly, "for auld langsyne,"' she said, with a bewitching smile, and laid her dainty hand on his arm.

'Really, I am amazed at William Lundie,' said Mrs. Moredun. 'He has grown quite a man of the world, and I can gather that there has been something more than friendship between our Lady Sophia and him out in India. Just look at the Earl, my dear, over yonder, beside young Strathearn. He looks as black as thunder.'

'Lady Devanha has been in India, then?' said Mrs. Mayne.

'Yes, she was brought up there. Her brother-in-law, don't you know, held an influential post under Government, and

she went out to her sister when her father died. She was only a girl of sixteen then, and that is nearly a quarter of a century ago.'

'She can't be so young as she looks,' said Mrs. Mayne.

'No; she must be five-and-thirty, I should say. It is a year on Christmas Day since she was married to the Earl at Calcutta. He met her there when he went to India to spend some of his patrimony, and they were married after six weeks' courtship.'

'Dear me, how interesting! Ah, Doctor Dunsyre, good evening. I have not seen you dancing this evening.'

'Good evening, ladies. I crossed the room to advise you professionally to sit out of this draught, else I shall have my hands full to-morrow,' said David Dunsyre, in his easy, gentlemanly way, and while he spoke his keen eyes dwelt upon the lovely, impassive face of Caroline Mayne. 'Miss Gertrude, will you allow me to take you to my sister? She is most anxious to see you.'

'May I, mamma?' asked Gertrude.

'Certainly, my dear,' said Mrs. Mayne graciously; 'only do not remain away from my side all the evening. Who is your sister's chaperon to-night, Doctor?'

'My aunt, Mrs. Carter of Craigerook,' answered he, and offered Gertrude his arm.

'How lovely Margaret looks to-night, and how good of you to bring me to her!' said Gertrude, and both voice and manner were very different from what Sir William Lundie had heard and seen, for Gertrude felt at home with David Dunsyre.

'I thought you looked wearied. What do you think of your neighbour of Castle Lundie?'

'I do not like to dance with him,' was all that Gertrude said, and then they were at Margaret's side.

'I was afraid Mrs. Mayne would not let you come, and I was equally afraid to come to you, dear,' said Margaret, as she took the white hand warmly in hers. 'This is my aunt, Mrs. Carter, and there is a seat for you; now we can have a cosy chat. Why, David is off already!'

Doctor Dunsyre was indeed already half across the room, and presently they saw him bending low over Caroline. She

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rose, and they took their places in a quadrille. So Doctor Dunsyre was the first to ask Miss Mayne to dance.

'Well, Gertrude, what do you think of the Rumford county ball?' asked Margaret, with a smile.

'I don't like balls, Margaret. They are very stupid things,' answered Gertrude decidedly.

'Why, my dear, you ought to be very proud to-night! Don't you know that your first partner is the lion of the evening, and that you were envied by all the women in the room?' said Margaret teasingly.

'Hush, Margaret,' said Gertrude quickly, and her face flushed again; for though Sir William Lundie was dancing with and talking to Lady Devanha, his eyes were oftenest upon the face of Gertrude Mayne. 'I have not seen you dancing much yet, Margaret,' she said presently.

'No; I have only been up twice—once with David and once with Mr. Strathearn. I never dance with strange gentlemen,' said Margaret quietly. 'Here comes John with Cousin Ellen; the quadrille is ended.'

John Strathearn resigned his partner to her mother, and turned with a look of unmistakeable pleasure to greet Gertrude Mayne. Although she had been unconscious of it, he had watched her every movement since she entered the room an hour ago. The opportunity he had longed for had come at last.

'Have you a space for my name on your card, Miss Mayne?' he asked, bending his noble head towards her, and there was a look in his eyes which it was as well Margaret Dunsyre did not see.

'Oh yes! it is not nearly full. See, I have only promised Sir William Lundie a mazurka,' she answered simply.

'They are striking up another waltz. If you are not too tired will you honour me?' said John a little eagerly.

Gertrude smiled her assent, put her wrap on the seat beside Margaret, and laid her hand on John Strathearn's arm. That gentle touch thrilled him through and through. Could it be that this fair, sweet, simple school-girl had won the heart of sensible John Strathearn in an hour's time, and was he, so long impervious to feminine charms, conquered at last?

'Do you like dancing?' he asked rather inanely.

'Sometimes,' she answered. 'I like this waltz. What lovely music, and how well you dance!'

'May I return the compliment?' he asked, with a smile.

'It is not a compliment, only truth,' she answered quite gravely.

'May I ask what has made you look so grave all the evening? Several times I almost fancied you looked sad.'

'Did you? Shall I tell you what I have been thinking all the evening, Mr. Strathearn?'

'If you please,' said John earnestly.

'I have been thinking that there is twenty times more money in this room than would rebuild the Watergate and every other wretched place in Rumford.'

'You mean the value of the dresses and jewels?'

'Yes; I have strange thoughts about these things, Mr. Strathearn. I could not bear to spend so much upon myself, knowing how many of my fellow-creatures are starving.'

'If there were more like you, Miss Mayne, this would be a less miserable world,' said John impulsively.

'Do you think the world is miserable? I am glad that I am not alone in thinking that. I have often even wondered why I was born'—

'Surely that is a very sad thing for one like you to think,' said John, and longed to say a great deal more.

'You do not know what troubles weigh upon my heart sometimes. I wish it were possible to remain always a child. It seems to me that when one grows older a new care comes every day'—

John was silent, simply because he had no words wherewith to answer her. She misunderstood his silence, and, when she spoke again, her voice was hurried and trembling.

'What have I been saying? I forgot you were a stranger. Pray forget it; I am only a school-girl still, Mr. Strathearn, who has not yet learned what my mother calls the ways of society.'

'I pray you never may, Miss Gertrude,' said John, looking down upon the sweet face with eyes dangerously eloquent. 'I was silent simply because I feared to say too much. May I hope that some day soon you will awake to find the world the bright and beautiful place it should be for such as you?'

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'Thank you; you are very good,' she said, and uplifted her truthful eyes to his face with a glance which he never forgot.

'Are you tired?' he said gently. 'Shall I take you to your mother, or back to Miss Dunsyre, or will you come with me to the conservatory? It is deliciously cool there.'

'I should like that,' she said readily, and again she laid her hand lightly on his arm.

What strength, and comfort, and rest seemed to come to her in the presence of this man! what new, strange happiness it was to feel the touch of his arm, to listen to the tones of his manly voice, only those in whose hearts young love is wakening can know!

Just as John's hand was upon the swaying curtain which separated the conservatory from the ball-room, Sir William Lundie came to Gertrude's side.

'Mrs. Mayne has commissioned me to take you to her side, Miss Mayne,' he said, with a courtly bow. 'She talks of going very shortly. Pray allow me.'

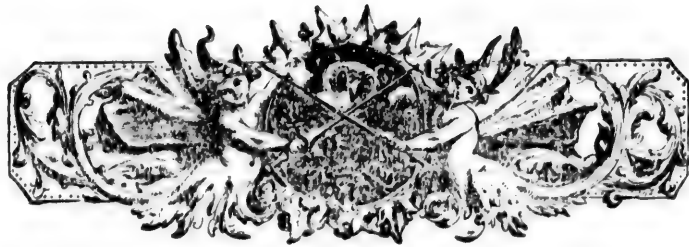
John Strathearn's face flushed darkly red. He was as proud as Lucifer, and his hot temper sprang up at the Baronet's calm ignoring of his presence.

Gertrude, trained to implicit obedience, would have slipped her hand from his arm, but he only held it the closer, and, turning his back upon Sir William, led her to her mother's side.

'I have to ask your pardon, Mrs. Mayne, if I have unwittingly displeased you by keeping your daughter too long from your side,' he said, with a courtly grace which equalled Sir William Lundie's. 'Miss Mayne, good evening.'

As he recrossed the room he encountered Sir William, who favoured him with a scowl which made his sallow face not a pleasant one to see. And so was forged the first link in the chain of rivalry and bitterness between the lord of Castle Lundie and the owner of the Earn Mills.






CHAPTER IV.

MORNING CALLS.

IN the spacious morning-room at Castle Lundie, Sir William Lundie and his sister sat at breakfast the morning after the county ball. She was her brother's junior by only five years, and she carried her age well. Even a keen observer, looking closely at the tall, commanding figure and clear-cut, haughty face, would scarcely guess that she had passed her thirty-fourth year. Elizabeth Lundie was not a beauty; there was nothing to attract in that sallow, somewhat harshly-featured face; nothing to win the heart in the expression of the cold grey eyes, nor in the curves of the firm, resolute mouth. She was a woman to be feared rather than loved, a woman who looked as if she never for a moment forgot her name and lineage, and who from her stately height seemed to look round upon all the world with indifference and scorn. Although rich and well-born, no suitor had ever sought the elder daughter of the house of Lundie. The younger one, sweet, winsome, sunny-hearted Eleanor, the idol of the Border county where she had been born and reared, had in her first season married an English earl, and would one day be Duchess of St. Roque. Elizabeth Lundie was practically without a home. During her brother's protracted absence in India she had dwelt chiefly with her sister, but, upon receiving notice of his intention to return, she had come down to Castle Lundie, and for the

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present it was agreed that she should remain with him. The brother and sister had never been great friends; in their younger days there had been many a bitter quarrel between them; but they were man and woman of the world now, too well-bred to quarrel even when their opinions differed. A slight indisposition had kept her at home from the county ball, and she was naturally anxious to hear more about it than what was given in the columns of the *Rumford Gazette*.

'When did you come home, William? I did not hear you,' she said, as she poured out his coffee.

'Between one and two, I think. When did the thing break up?' he said carelessly, as he gathered his letters together and laid them aside.

'Nearly five o'clock according to the *Gazette*, but everybody would be away long before that.'

'The best people were moving when I came off. I wish you had been there, Elizabeth.'

'Do you? Was it so enjoyable?'

'It was new to me, and so I enjoyed it thoroughly.'

'You must have made friends, then?' said Miss Lundie a trifle drily.

'Not I. Only I renewed my acquaintance with several old ones—Devanha and his lovely wife were there. I believe she was the belle of the evening.'

'You must have met her in Calcutta, William? She lived there for some years previous to her marriage.'

'Yes, I knew her very well. A good thing it was for Sophia Lestrangle that Devanha's wanderings led him to India.'

'Why, had she no prospects there?'

'None. She was too well known as a coquette. I say, Elizabeth, do you know anything about the Strathearns, manufacturers in Rumford?'

'I know who they are—father and son, immensely wealthy. They live at Redlands, that place between us and Meadowflats. I know the young man by sight. He is very handsome.'

'And an audacious puppy as well,' said Sir William, with darkening brow. 'That is one of the drawbacks of an affair like last night's, one has to meet all sorts and conditions of men on equal ground.'

'Not necessarily. I should imagine it would not be difficult to draw a distinct enough line,' said Miss Lundie indifferently. 'Do you think Lady Devanha will call, William?'

'It is more than likely—in fact, you may expect to be deluged with visitors for the next fortnight. You will be of great use to me at the present time, Elizabeth.'

'I know that, else I would not have been so pressed to come,' replied Miss Lundie drily.

'It is well we understand each other,' said Sir William, with a slight smile, and sauntered carelessly out of the room.

Miss Lundie leaned her arms on the table, and sat for some time apparently deeply absorbed in thought. Her meditations were not wholly pleasant. She knew over-well that her brother only regarded her in the light of a convenience, to be set aside whenever he had no further use for her. The advent of a mistress to Castle Lundie would be the signal for her to depart wheresoever she liked. But in the meantime she would enjoy her reign, for, even with the prospect of a usurper in the distance, life as absolute mistress of her brother's house was preferable to being a tolerated inmate at Leybourne Park. The Earl, out of his great love for his fair young wife, was kind to her sister; nevertheless, it was a relief when she left them, and Elizabeth knew it only too well. She rose at length, and retired to the library to write a letter to Eleanor. That done, she sauntered idly out of doors, wondering what she could do to make the time pass. When she came round again to the front of the house, she saw at the door a phaeton and two chestnut ponies in charge of a page-boy. She hastened indoors, glad that visitors had come to relieve the monotony of the day.

'Who is in the drawing-room, Kirkby?' she asked the servant just coming down-stairs.

'Two ladies, Miss Lundie, Mrs. and Miss Franklin-Mayne of Meadowflats,' replied the man, and keenly watched Miss Lundie's face.

She preserved an admirable expression of indifference until Kirkby passed on, then she looked annoyed.

She hesitated a moment on the drawing-room landing, undecided whether to enter the room or decline to see the visitors. But curiosity overcame her pride, and she opened

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the door. A lady sat on a basket chair on the hearth, richly attired in a fashionable fur-trimmed mantle and a stylish and youthful-looking bonnet. The faded face under the nodding plumes was wreathed in smiles, and she rose with a graceful bow.

'I feel that I must apologize, dear Miss Lundie, for this early call; but as I heard from my friend the Hon. Mrs. Morelun, last night, that you were indisposed, I thought it would be but neighbourly to make inquiries this morning. This is my eldest daughter. Caroline, Miss Lundie is in the room.'

The tall and graceful figure in the window turned, and then Elizabeth Lundie saw the marvellous beauty of her face. But her expression did not change; she included mother and daughter in one distant bow, and stood with one slender hand laid lightly on the table, and an expectant look on her haughty face, as if waiting to hear what more Mrs. Franklin-Mayne had to say.

'It must be so dull for you in this great house alone,' said Mrs. Mayne, resuming her seat, apparently unabashed by her cool reception. 'And we are such near neighbours that it will be charming for us to visit each other often.'

Looking at the haughty wonder on Miss Lundie's face, Caroline Mayne smiled slightly, and turned her head towards the window.

'You are most kind, Mrs. Mayne, but I do not visit much,' replied Elizabeth Lundie frigidly. 'Will you be so good as to excuse me this morning? As mistress of my brother's house, my time is not entirely my own.'

'Certainly, my dear Miss Lundie. Pray make no apologies,' said Mrs. Mayne effusively; nevertheless she bit her lip in her excessive chagrin. 'Caroline, my love, if you are quite ready we will go.'

Caroline turned at once. Her serene and proud composure equalled that of Miss Lundie; the humiliation which would have made many another woman ready to sink with shame could not make her wince. That was only the outward cloak, however; the slim hands resting in the dainty muff were clenched together, and her soul was a tumult of indignation. Nevertheless, she returned Miss Lundie's bow with one as distant as her own, and followed her mother down-stairs.

'That is a proud and haughty dame, and no mistake,' said Mrs. Mayne, when they entered the carriage.

Then she vented her chagrin by whipping the chestnuts unmercifully.

'I told you what it would be, mamma,' said Caroline bitterly. 'You would drag me to this place to be insulted by that woman. It is the first and last time.'

'My dear, just wait a little; we will pay her out,' said Mrs. Mayne, with energy. 'She is no lady. Her treatment of us was the height of rudeness. If you ever reign at Castle Lundie, I hope you will not forget this.'

'I should like to be mistress of Castle Lundie for one day, mamma, to make her smart for this,' said Caroline, with flushing face. 'Here is Doctor Dunsyre's dogcart coming.'

'Good morning, ladies,' said the Doctor, in his cheery, happy way, and inwardly wondered what had been their errand to Castle Lundie.

'Good morning, Doctor Dunsyre,' responded Mrs. Mayne graciously. 'We have just been inquiring for Miss Lundie; I felt so anxious about her. Ah, Miss Dunsyre, how are you? But needless to ask, you look so well.'

'I am well, thank you, Mrs. Mayne,' said Margaret a little stiffly, for she most thoroughly resented the patronizing graciousness of Mrs. Mayne's manner.

'Won't you turn with us and have a bit of lunch at Meadowflats?' said Mrs. Mayne.

Then Doctor Dunsyre looked straight down into Caroline's eyes before he made answer, but they were following the soaring of a bird upon the wing. But there was a change upon her face, a wondrous softening, a grave, unspeakable tenderness, which added uncommonly to its beauty.

'Thanks. We would have been pleased, but we are on our way to lunch at Redlands,' responded Doctor Dunsyre. 'You would not see Sir William at the Castle. We met him riding through Rumford as we came up. The county ball was a great success, wasn't it? I hope Miss Gertrude is none the worse for it. I need not express any anxieties about you. You do not even look fatigued.'

'Not in the least. I feel it hard to realize that I am growing old, I feel so young physically and mentally,' said Mrs.

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Mayne coquettishly. 'Well, good morning. Come soon to Meadowflats, and bring your sister. Good morning.'

'What a stiff, unpleasant-looking creature Margaret Dunsyre is!' she said to Caroline the moment they parted. 'That sealskin coat she wears would not be got under a hundred guineas. Where these people get it is a mystery.'

Caroline made no reply. Her eyes were still following the bird's upward flight, but where were her thoughts?

Sir William Lundie returned home from Rumford in time for luncheon at two. His sister joined him in the dining-room, and there was an amused smile playing about her lips as she took her seat at the table. When the servant left the room she looked at her brother, the smile deepening.

'I have had some visitors this morning, William.'

'Not Lady Devanha, so early after an evening out?' he said, without much interest.

'No; make another guess.'

'Mrs. Moredun, the Grahams, Lady Hamilton—any or all of these?'

'None. Our nearest neighbours did me the honour this morning,' said Miss Lundie, with curling lip.

'Not the ladies from Meadowflats?' said Sir William, with sudden interest.

'Verily; she is a frightful old woman that. I have often heard about her, but the reality surpassed my most vivid imagination.'

'Who was with her?'

'Her eldest daughter, a handsome young woman, apparently possessed of more sense than her foolish mother.'

'I hope you were civil to them, Elizabeth,' said Sir William a trifle sternly.

'I was *not*. I showed them as plainly as possible my opinion of their presumption,' said Miss Lundie serenely.

'I regret that you so far forgot yourself. It is my desire that you be kind and courteous in future to the ladies belonging to the household of my old friend Franklin-Mayne.'

Miss Lundie dropped her dessert-spoon, and looked at her brother. Her face as she did so was indeed a study. But the truth dawned upon her in a moment.

'In times gone there were not many comings and goings

between Castle Lundie and Meadowflats,' she said slowly. 'There is a meaning for it now. I must know it before I obey you.'

'You are absurd, Elizabeth,' said the Baronet sharply. 'There is no reason, except that, whatever his means or family history, Franklin-Mayne is a scholar and a gentleman. I am sorry for him, and I intend to cultivate his friendship here.'

'And is it necessary that I should cultivate the friendship of his wife and daughters because you are sorry for *him*?' asked Miss Lundie.

Sir William rose. Of late years he had not been accustomed to have his will thwarted, and it annoyed him now.

'Look here, Elizabeth; if there is to be peace between us,—if, in short, you are to remain at Castle Lundie,—it must be understood between us that my friends, whoever they may be, are to be made welcome to my house. And if I say there are to be comings and goings now between Castle Lundie and Meadowflats, I expect to be obeyed.'

Elizabeth Lundie's face flushed darkly red. She bit her lip to keep back the storm of angry words burning for utterance.

'In the exercise of your despotic power, I would only ask you to remember that something is due to me and to the honour of Castle Lundie,' she said, rising from her chair. 'I foresee that I shall not be required here very long.'

So saying, Miss Lundie swept from the room.

She fancied she knew the truth, and it was her settled conviction that she had seen that day the woman who was to supplant her,—that Caroline Mayne was the future lady of Castle Lundie.

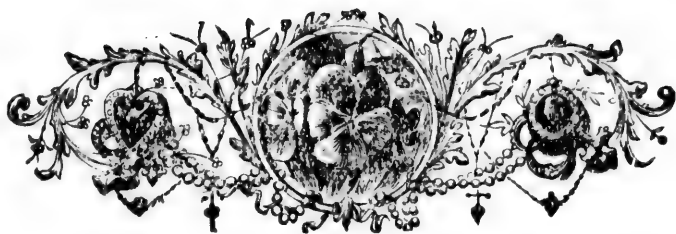


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CHAPTER V.

THE STRATHEARNS—FATHER AND SON.

I AM glad you are not going down to the mill this morning, John. It is always a treat to me when you are at home of a morning.'

'Is it, father? In these busy times it is not easy to spare a day; but the New Year will be upon us before we know where we are, and then I'll be days with you,' replied John cheerily. 'Suppose we go down the avenue a bit and see if Dunsyre is coming. He promised to be punctual, and it is ten minutes to one now.'

'Very well, my lad, anywhere with you.'

They left the dining-room together, and John helped his father on with his greatcoat, and took care to wrap his muffler close about his throat. The old man was all of his own upon earth, and it behoved him to love and cherish him, for he could not hope to have him very long. Then they emerged together into the clear, bracing coolness of the bright November day, making unconsciously that most beautiful picture, the dependence of age upon the strong and willing arm of youth. They were very like each other, only the tall figure of John Strathearn the elder was bent now from its manly height, and he walked feebly as if his limbs had lost their old-time vigour. Little wonder if they had, for the old man was in his eighty-seventh year.

'Did you say Margaret was coming with David to-day,

John?' he asked, as John gently guided his steps round the sweeping curve of the avenue.

'Yes; she has been talking for a long time of coming to see your fern-house,' answered John a little absently, for another face than that of Margaret Dunsyre was at that moment before his mental vision.

'I am glad she is coming. She is a good girl, and very kind to the old man,' said his father, with that simplicity to which we sometimes return in our age. Sometimes, I say, for there is a grasping and unlovely age as well, which has none of the winning attributes of childhood.

'Are *you* glad she is coming, John?'

'Glad? Of course I am. Haven't I loved Margaret Dunsyre since we played together in pinafores?' said John, with a laugh.

'That is good. John, I want to say something to you, my boy. I have wanted to say it for a long time,' said the old man then, with a kind of trembling eagerness.

'Say away, then, father; I am listening,' said John cheerily.

'It is this. You say you have loved Margaret since you were children. If—if you want to marry her, and I am sure you must, since you have loved her so long,' said the old man wistfully, 'don't let me stand in the way. I—I want to see you happy, my lad. Bring your wife home to Redlands, and, if you or she thought I would be in the way, I could go down to Wells Green to live, and Marjorie would go with me; or I would stay, if you and she wished. Anything to see you happy, my dear, dear lad. You have loved and served me faithfully so long, and you are old enough now. Don't let me stand in your way.'

John did not speak. His eyes were full of tears, and his firm under-lip quivered; for the moment emotion had the mastery.

'What has put such a thing into your head, dad?' he said at length, using the old childish name not yet wholly laid aside or forgotten.

'It was quite natural that I should think of it, John, since you have arrived at the age when most men begin to think of building up a home for themselves,' said the old man a little deprecatingly, for he fancied his son spoke very gravely.

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'Don't be vexed with me, lad, and think it over; and Margaret would make a good mistress of Redlands.'

'She would,' said John. 'But I have never thought of her in any light other than as a sister. I have known her too long and intimately to feel *that* kind of love for her. Poor old dad! and you have been worrying yourself over my wifeless state, and never said a word about it?' he added teasingly. 'When did I begin to show signs of being in love, eh?'

'Never; only I thought you might be wishing to marry, and keeping back because of me. But I am very glad that'—

'Glad what?' asked John, with a slight smile.

'Glad that it is not Margaret Dunsyre.'

'You are the most contrary of mortals, dad. Didn't you say a minute ago that she would make a good mistress of Redlands?'

'So I did, and so she would, but I didn't say she would make the best of wives to you, John,' said the old man shrewdly. 'She is a trifle too proud and independent, too self-assertive and strong-minded for you, John. I don't think you would agree.'

John laughed outright.

'You are 'aking to character-study in your old age, father,' he said, in an amused voice. 'There, I hear the rattle of David's wheels, and, upon my word, I feel quite guilty.'

He did not look at all guilty, however, when presently the dogcart swept round the bend, and Doctor Dunsyre drew up his horse to walking pace.

'Good morning; late as usual,' said the Doctor gaily.

'Mr. Strathearn, I am glad to see you able to be out of doors in November. Isn't this a fine bracing morning for you? John, you have the easiest of lives. I have been on the move since half-past four this morning.'

'You have the satisfaction of knowing yourself a benefactor of your kind,' said John. 'Shall I help you to alight, Margaret? You look as if you were tired of your seat.'

'So I am. We left shortly after ten, and David solemnly assured me he had only two houses to visit, but the morning air seemed to refresh his memory, for I counted seven calls. Thank you.'

She laid her hand in his and lightly sprang to the ground. She looked fair indeed with the roseleaf bloom on her cheek, and the bright light of youth and health in her eyes. Her attire became her rarely well; it was expensive, and in the best of taste, for Margaret Dunsyre was a connoisseur in dress.

She turned at once to Mr. Strathearn the elder, slipped her hand within his arm, and led him a little in advance of the others.

'And how are you, my dear? You look very well—quite like a rose in June,' said the old man, smiling and patting her hand.

'Oh, I am well; I am always well,' she answered gaily. 'How pleasant it is to come to Redlands again! I have always loved it, I think, since the old childish days.'

'Ay, ay, we cling to the past,' said the old man musingly. 'So you have come to see my fernery, John tells me. It is the old man's latest whim. When we grow old, my dear, we are made up of whims and fancies and memories. The actual present has very little part in our lives then.'

'I suppose so,' said Margaret a little abstractedly, for her eyes were wandering round the picturesque and well-kept policy surrounding the fine old house. Ay, she loved Redlands, indeed, and there stretched before her a fair vision of the time when it would be her home. She had accustomed herself of late to picture her future life, and it had its centre here.

'Well, my dear, I will leave you to go in. I should like to go round to the stables with the lads,' said Mr. Strathearn when they reached the house. 'Marjorie knows you are coming. She will take you up-stairs, or you should know the way alone now.'

'Oh yes, nicely, thanks,' answered Margaret brightly, and ran up the steps and entered the open door. The housekeeper, however, had heard the voices, and now came forward to greet her.

Marjorie Fleming had served at Redlands since her girlhood, and she had all the freedom of speech and of action so characteristic of long and faithful service. She was a middle-aged woman now, of plain yet pleasant appearance, neatly dressed in a good black merino gown and a black silk apron. Love of Redlands and of the Strathearns—father and son—

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was the passion of her life ; and, if the truth must be told, she was jealously suspicious of Margaret Dunsyre. Therefore her manner, though perfectly respectful, was rather distant and stiff, and she had only the briefest monosyllables in reply to Margaret's pleasant remarks.

'Will you please come this way, ma'am ; no, please, I have altered the spare bedroom ; it is on this flat now,' she said.

'You do just as you please still, I see, Marjorie,' said Miss Dunsyre, with a smile.

'And what for no?' inquired Marjorie rather snappishly. 'If I thoct the best bed was bein' spoiled wi' the dampness comin' off that muckle tree at the sooth side o' the house, was'd no' my duty to change'd?'

'Quite right ; you are a careful housekeeper,' said Margaret.

'When ye are ready, ma'am, will ye comé doon to the parlour? Maister John was for me lichtin' a fire in the drawin'-room, but as ye wasna to bide for tea I thoct it a needless dirtyin',' said Marjorie, and withdrew.

Margaret smiled as she smoothed her hair at the mirror. She was always amused at John's housekeeper, but sometimes the thought flashed across her mind that she would be rather unpleasant to deal with when she came to Redlands, and made the changes she often pictured would be such an improvement in the house. Instead of going to the parlour, as Marjorie had desired, she found her way to the dining-room, where the table was laid for lunch. It was a wide and comfortable room, with a large oriel window facing the avenue. The furnishings, if rather old-fashioned, were handsome and substantial, and there were many valuable and antique articles, telling of a refined and cultured taste. Also the pictures on the walls were gems of art, which would bring their money's worth any day. The majority of them had been bought since John attained his manhood, for his tastes were essentially those of a connoisseur and a gentleman as well. Margaret threw herself into the spacious, morocco-covered easy-chair, placed her dainty feet on the fender, and dreamed her golden dreams.

Ah me ! as they lightly come, so they lightly go, till the reality stares us in the face, hard, bare, and unlovely, shorn of romance and poetry ; the matter-of-fact prose of everyday life. Well for us who have love to make it sweet.

When the gentlemen entered, luncheon was served at once. It was a pleasant meal, as every meal must be when those who partake of it are old and tried friends, betwixt whom there is neither barrier nor restraint. Talk flowed easily, the ball was discussed, and other items of town gossip were freely spoken of, yet in a kindly spirit, without venom or spleen.

'Talking of the ball and those who were at it,' said Margaret, 'we met Mrs. Franklin-Mayne and Caroline returning from a call at Castle Lundie. I said to David I wondered how Miss Lundie could receive it. She is very proud.'

'Mrs. Mayne seems ambitious,' said John quietly. 'I like her husband. There is no affectation about him.'

'Nor about the second daughter,' said the Doctor coolly. 'She is very like her father.'

'I am very fond of Gertrude,' said Margaret, with a tinge of patronage in her voice which John Strathearn resented in his inmost soul. He kept his eyes steadily bent upon his plate, and made no further remark upon the Franklin-Maynes. While the two younger men lingered a little at the table, Mr. Strathearn took Margaret out to see his fernery. And he kept her so long there with his garrulous talk that it was three o'clock before they returned to the house, to find that the Doctor had gone for the dogcart. Margaret was disappointed. She had hoped for a talk or a stroll with John. It was only of late she had begun to admit that she *did* hope and desire for such opportunities. Poor Margaret! this love to which she had but newly awakened was bringing in its train much unrest, and vague, uncertain longings, only a foretaste of the deeper pain to come.

John was to drive into town with them, to look through the mill and see what letters were brought by the afternoon mail. When he alighted at the by-path which struck off the high road and led straight to the Earn Mills, he promised to come up for a few minutes at Margaret's tea-hour, in the hope the Doctor might be at liberty to walk part of the way home with him. He went straight to the mill, read his letters, and, after putting off a little time with his manager, proceeded leisurely up the High Street towards the Doctor's house.

Just when he was within a hundred yards of it he saw the door open and the slight figure of Gertrude Mayne emerge

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from it. His heart leaped within him, and he quickened his pace, for at that very moment he was thinking of her, wondering when they should meet again. She came towards him somewhat shyly, and would have passed by, but he stood still and stretched out his hand. She laid her own in it, and uplifted her eyes to his face, wondering a little why her heart should beat quicker at sight of this man.

'I am glad that you are not too much fatigued to come out to-day,' he said earnestly. 'But surely you have not walked from Meadowflats?'

'Why not?' she asked, with a smile. 'I called for Miss Dunsyre, but she was so late in coming home that I had only time to shake hands and run away. It gets so quickly dark now.'

'Are you not afraid to be out alone in these quiet by-paths after dusk?'

'Oh no; nobody would harm me; only papa gets anxious sometimes, and comes to seek me, and then he scolds me,' she said, smiling still.

'If you will allow me, I shall walk with you until we meet Mr. Mayne,' said John eagerly, forgetting that tea was waiting for him, and Margaret, too, not a hundred yards away. 'I am walking home myself to-night, and our ways, as you know, lie together.'

'Thanks; you are very good,' said Gertrude simply; so they turned and went down the street together.

There was very little said, and yet each felt at home with the other. When crossing the bridge over the Running Burn John drew her hand within his arm. She accepted it at once, for it brought to her an unspeakable sense of safety and strength. And John? He knew very well it was madness—that, even if he should ever win her love, there was not one, but a thousand obstacles in the way. He would not look into the future; he would be content with the present moment, which was to him one of intense happiness.

When they reached the gate which gave entrance to the park at Meadowflats she stood still.

'I think you need not come any farther,' she said gently. 'How can I thank you? You have made the walk so pleasant for me.'

'And what has it been for me?' said John; and, when he took her offered hand, he kept it longer in his own than he need have done.

She made no answer, but turned her head a little away, for a strange burning glow overspread it.

'Good-night; I must go, papa will be so anxious. And thank you again, Mr. Strathearn,' she said, and withdrew her hand.

'Good-night,' said John, and his manly voice took a note of deeper earnestness. 'Dare I express the hope that we may meet again, and soon?'

She did not at once reply. Then, with a sudden quick gesture, she turned her head, and held out her hand again. There was no mistaking the look and the gesture; both were full of perfect trust.

'May God bless and keep you, Miss Gertrude,' he said hoarsely, 'till we meet again.'

Then he raised the hand to his lips, lifted his hat, and walked away. When he reached the bridge again he took off his hat, and let the cool winds play upon his brow.

'John Strathearn,' he said to himself a little scornfully, 'what is to be the end of this? You are an ass and a fool!'

Ah, what was to be the end indeed?

'John has never come, David,' said Margaret Dunsyre, when her brother came in to tea at five.

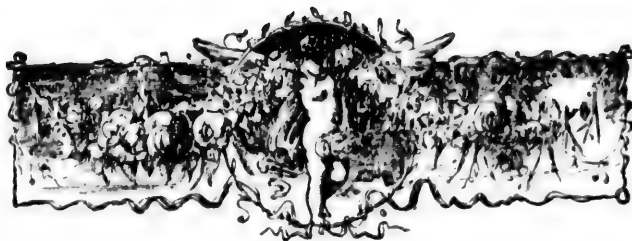
'No, nor won't to night,' said the Doctor drily. 'As I came down from Wildhaugh I saw him walking along the burn-side. Guess with whom?'

'How could I guess?' asked Margaret sharply, and turned her head away.

'Gertrude Mayne.'



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CHAPTER VI.

FORTUNE SMILES.

NOTHING but bills this morning; I am worried to death,' said Mrs. Franklin-Mayne. 'Really I wish tradespeople would not be so absurdly unreasonable. They take away any pleasure one might have in anticipating the festive season.'

She swept the pile of letters and accounts aside with impatient hand, and proceeded to fill the coffee-cups; but her face wore an expression of annoyance and peevish discontent, which made her look her age to the full.

Her husband laid down his *Scotsman* and drew the offending documents to the side of his plate. As he took them up and looked at them one by one, Gertrude, watching him, fancied the lines deepened on his troubled brow.

'Thirty-five pounds to Macmillan, Henrietta! what on earth is it for?' he asked blankly.

'I suppose Caroline's dress and mine will be included, and you remember the household stuff we got when we came here was never paid for,' replied his wife.

'Why, I gave you the money for that—fourteen pounds odds—I remember quite well!' he said irritably.

'My love, you are thinking of something else; your memory was always treacherous,' said Mrs. Mayne sweetly, though she knew very well the money had been received and frittered away in trifles. 'Caroline, who are your correspondents to-day?'

'I have only a note from Blanche Tremaine, asking if we can receive her for Christmas, as her brother and his wife are going out of town,' replied Caroline.

'Henrietta, I had no idea we owed so much in Rumford,' interrupted Mr. Mayne, in the same vexed tones. 'Really this is alarming. Where am I to get the wherewithal to settle these accounts?'

'Don't worry yourself, Gilbert. Leave me to manage the Rumford tradespeople. I have had to deal with their clamorous kind before,' said his wife serenely. 'Gertrude, child, you eat nothing. Pass in your cup.'

'No, thank you, mamma. I am not hungry,' answered Gertrude, and there was an unmistakeable tremor in her voice.

Mr. Mayne rose from the table with a heavy sigh and left the room. His wife breathed a sigh of relief.

'It is most annoying when the post-bag comes into the breakfast-room,' she said. 'If it had not been late I could have had all these disagreeable missives removed, and there would have been none of this unpleasantness. Your father will worry the life out of me now for a few days over these wretched accounts.'

'Will there be any prospect of us going to London in spring, mamma?' asked Caroline, who was not specially interested in the matter of accounts.

'My dear, how can I tell? It will depend on how things are here. Really I am disappointed in our success here. I am sure no woman could work more energetically, nor plan more cleverly, than I do, and yet we are not a step nearer entering county society. I hate the Scotch!'

'I hate this place, mamma! It is a dreary, wretched existence,' said Caroline, with some passion in her voice. 'London was better than this. We were not so often humiliated and insulted there.'

'I don't know. I have borne a good deal of that in London. I am sure, if there is such a thing as justice or equity in the world, some good fortune will befall us soon,' said Mrs. Mayne. 'Well, I must go down to Rumford, I suppose, and see what can be done to pacify these exacting tradespeople. I'll give Macmillan a ten-pound note, and

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take on something else, to pacify him. Will you come, Caroline?’

‘No, thank you, mamma,’ said Caroline, with a slight shrug. ‘I am afraid I should not greatly enjoy hearing you smoothing down Rumford shopkeepers. May I write to Blanche and say we will be glad to see her?’

‘You can, though it is a bore, but it is not wise to quarrel with an earl’s sister. It is to be hoped she will have the courtesy to ask you to pay a return visit to Trentham Park.’

Breakfast being quite finished, Gertrude rose and stole out of doors to look for her father. She found him pacing somewhat restlessly to and fro the shrubbery, with an expression of deep anxiety on his careworn face. She stole to his side, clasped her two hands on his arm, and looked up with anxious, loving eyes into his.

‘Dear daddy,’ she said tenderly, ‘I am very sorry. I wish I could chase all your cares away.’

‘I wish you could, pussy,’ he said, with a faint smile, and his hand closed over hers. ‘Your old father is in great straits, my dear.’

Gertrude did not speak. She knew too well the nature of these straits, and how powerless she was to help or lighten them.

‘Life is very hard, Gertrude,’ he said, after a moment’s silence. ‘Looking back I cannot recall the time when I had not to struggle with monetary cares.’

More closely still the loving hands pressed his arm, but the sweet lips did not utter all the sympathy prompted by the tender heart.

‘I suppose there was a mistake at the beginning. I was not sufficiently firm at the outset of my married life, and so I have never been able to extricate myself from the sea of difficulty,’ continued Gilbert Mayne, unconscious that his words implied censure of his wife. ‘When we came here I thought it would be different, but it isn’t. It is even worse, for in a small place like Rumford our affairs are only too well known. That was the advantage of London; it could hide much sin and shame.’

‘Dear father, I wish I could do a little to help you,’ said Gertrude, through falling tears.

'My dear, perhaps some day you may,' said Gilbert Mayne absently, not thinking very much of what he was saying.

'Papa, would it not be better to dismiss some of the servants, and live more quietly?' she said a little timidly. 'I am sure I could help a great deal in the house. I would be so willing and glad.'

A smile touched for a moment the anxious face of the master of Meadowflats.

'My dear, it is always easier to increase expenditure than to reduce it, as you may find out some day,' he said. 'The plan you suggest would be the only remedy, but I fear it would require more courage than either your mother or I possess. We are not so young as we were, and I daresay could not do without the comforts to which we have been accustomed.'

Although Mr. Mayne included himself in his remarks, Gertrude knew very well that he would gladly deprive himself of luxuries—even of comforts—if by these means he could give to every man his due.

Looking at him with keen and loving eyes, she noted that his face was pale and haggard, and that his eyes were encircled by deep shadows. He seemed to have aged of late, and little wonder. Care did not sit lightly on the heart of Franklin-Mayne.

'A truce to such dismal talk, puss. Suppose you and I go for a canter this morning?' he said, with an attempt at gaiety. 'You are losing your roses too. My darling, do not worry yourself over your father's troubles. You will have your own to bear by and by. Reserve your strength for them. I am often anxious about my girls, Gertie, and what is to become of them when I am gone.'

'Dear papa, don't speak in that way; you will be spared for many years yet, please God,' said Gertrude tremulously. 'Oh, papa, I wish there could be some way opened up for me to help you!'

'I take the will for the deed, my pet,' said her father fondly. 'I hear the sound of wheels. I wonder if mamma is expecting any visitors to-day, or if it will be Grahame. Ah, there they are. Sir William Lundie and a lady; upon my honour it is! Run in and tell your mother, while I go to meet them.'

Gertrude, after one glance of unutterable surprise at the

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rapidly approaching riders, fled into the house. The announcement of such distinguished visitors filled the vain heart of Mrs. Mayne with a flutter of excitement.

'Fortune is going to favour us, my dear; it is always the darkest hour before the dawn, as somebody says,' she said to Caroline as they repaired to the drawing-room to be in readiness to welcome the guests. 'Yes, Gertrude, love, you can stay out of the room if you like. I can say you are engaged. But probably Sir William and Miss Lundie will not remember to ask for you,' she added serenely, in reply to Gertrude's request to be allowed to absent herself.

Much relieved, Gertrude ran lightly up-stairs to her own room. She was shy by nature, and she never recalled Sir William Lundie's manner towards her on the night of the ball without nervousness.

Apparently Mrs. Mayne had forgotten or forgiven the insult she and Caroline had received at Castle Lundie, for when the drawing-room door opened she came forward all smiles and bows to greet Sir William and his sister. But Caroline neither forgot nor forgave so readily. She stood in the window, a fair and beautiful picture in her neat and becoming morning gown, and only haughtily inclined her head towards Miss Lundie.

'So good of you to remember us, dear Sir William,' said Mrs. Mayne officiously. 'We are veritably strangers in a strange land still, and we hoped, and not without cause, thanks to you, that your return to Castle Lundie would make a little difference to us.'

Miss Lundie smiled slightly, took the seat Mr. Mayne placed for her, and held her peace. It was evident to Caroline at least that it was not of her own free will that Elizabeth Lundie had come to Meadowflats.

'My sister and I owe you an apology for being so long in returning your call,' said Sir William, glancing pointedly at his sister. 'But you can readily imagine that our time has been fully occupied.'

'No apology is necessary, I assure you, Sir William,' said Mrs. Mayne, glorying in her triumph over Miss Lundie. 'I hope you find life in your own home pleasant after all your wanderings.'

'Thanks, very. You have a pretty spot here,' he said,

and walked over to the window, where Caroline sat, erect, beautiful, and calm, in striking contrast to her mother's eager, flurried delight. 'I trust you find life in Scotland pleasant, Miss Mayne,' he added, and looked with admiration at her lovely face. It was impossible not to admire Caroline Mayne, and William Lundie was not the man to pass by unheeded anything of beauty, especially if it was to be found in a woman's face. Nevertheless his eyes wandered restlessly round the room, and often turned expectantly to the door, as if they could not find the thing they sought.

'I do not like Scotland, and never shall,' Caroline answered briefly. 'I am an Englishwoman in everything but birth.'

'I hope some day you may change these strongly-expressed opinions, Miss Mayne,' said Sir William gallantly, whereat the smile died from the face of Elizabeth Lundie, and an expression of displeasure took its place. Her presence was sufficient to chill even Mrs. Mayne's gaiety, but with Sir William on her side that lady could afford to dispense with his sister's courtesy. The Baronet's brow grew black when she answered Mrs. Mayne's remarks in the briefest monosyllables, and that look boded ill for the peace of Castle Lundie.

'Is your other daughter absent from you, Mrs. Mayne?' queried Sir William, when his sister at length made a motion to rise.

'Gertrude? Oh no, but she is so shy, dear child; so shortly out of the schoolroom, you know, she runs off at the very hint of visitors,' Mrs. Mayne explained, and in a moment her hand was on the bell-rope. Anything to prolong the call. 'Tell Miss Gertrude I desire her presence here, Barrett,' she said to the maid who answered her peremptory summons. 'Say she is to come down at once.'

Mrs. Mayne was considerably surprised that Sir William should even remember to speak of Gertrude, whom she still regarded as a child, not interesting in any way. Caroline was also surprised, and, turning her fathomless eyes to the window again, she recalled the night of the county ball and the many admiring remarks and glances which had fallen to Gertrude's share.

'When may I look for you to shoot over my covers with me, Mr. Mayne?' said Sir William affably. 'They have been well preserved in my absence, and afford splendid sport now.'

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'I am no great shot, Sir William,' replied Franklin-Mayne, his quiet manner contrasting strongly with his wife's effusiveness.

'You used to be, Gilbert,' she said reprovingly. 'I have no doubt a little practice would improve you again. It is truly kind of Sir William to ask you.'

'Sir William knows I think so, I daresay, Henrietta,' said Mr. Mayne, with a slight smile, and then Gertrude entered the room. She came forward with a quick, nervous step, and a slightly heightened colour in her cheek. Had she dared she would have disobeyed the peremptory summons delivered to her by Barrett. Sir William advanced to meet her with a low bow, and a look of deep admiration in his eyes. Miss Lundie curiously turned her head, and saw a slim, girlish figure, not yet fully matured, a sweet, open face, lit by earnest eyes and crowned by sunny hair, an insignificant-looking school-girl, she thought, but preferable to her handsome sister. Therefore she thawed slightly, and even extended the tips of her haughty fingers to Gertrude Mayne.

'Come and sit down by me, Gertrude,' said Mrs. Mayne. 'You must excuse my dear child's shyness. She has not yet come out, and has not acquired that ease of manner which only society can give.'

'Miss Gertrude is unspeakably charming as she is,' said Sir William, and his eyes never for a moment left Gertrude's face. 'You are wise, Mrs. Mayne, in keeping your young daughter by your side as long as possible. Pardon me, if I express my conviction that too many of our young girls are too early introduced into the world of society.'

'I quite agree with you, Sir William. When I was Gertrude's age I was my mother's nightly companion at ball, and dinner, and rout,' said Mrs. Mayne pensively. 'The consequence is that one feels aged before one's time.'

'If you are quite ready, William, we will go,' said Miss Lundie, and her expression seemed to say she could bear no more. 'I hope you do not forget that Lord and Lady Devanha lunch with us to-day.'

'In that case I will not urge you to prolong your call,' said Mrs. Mayne. 'But I hope, Sir William, that we may have the honour and pleasure of receiving you at lunch at Meadowflats at no distant date.'

'Thanks, we will be delighted. But I hope before then that we may have the pleasure of seeing you at Castle Lundie, accompanied by *both* your daughters,' said Sir William, with unmistakeable emphasis on the latter part of his sentence. 'Elizabeth, what day could you be at home to receive the ladies?'

'I am always at home, and I shall be happy to receive Mrs. Mayne any day,' replied Miss Lundie. 'Good morning, Miss Gertrude. I hope *you* will come.'

She looked down into Gertrude's face with a more kindly aspect than she had shown during that mockery of a neighbourly call. Gertrude uplifted her eyes to the proud face, but she did not speak. She did not know what spell bound her, but her tongue seemed to refuse to perform its work in the presence of the master of Castle Lundie. After bidding Mrs. Mayne and Caroline good morning, he came to her and fixed his dark eyes upon her face. That look acted like a magnet, and she was obliged to meet it.

'I hope to have the unspeakable pleasure of seeing you at Castle Lundie soon, Miss Gertrude,' he said impressively, and he held her hand very closely in his. She withdrew it hurriedly, and, rising, walked over to the window to hide her trembling.

As soon as possible she escaped from the room, and stole out of doors to see whether the fresh, free wind of heaven would sweep away the strange dread which oppressed her.

Mrs. Mayne was in high spirits, and spoke to her husband of the probability of Caroline one day becoming Lady Lundie.

He heard her with a smile, and watched the while Gertrude's figure wending its way through the park towards the Running Burn.

'I think your perceptions are at fault for once, Henrietta,' he said at length.

'Oh, nonsense! What else could you suppose could bring the man here but admiration for Caroline? We are not particularly attractive, Gilbert.'

'No; but you and I and Caroline are not the only inmates of the house,' said Franklin-Mayne slowly. 'If either of the girls attain to such a position as Sir William's wife, it will not be Caroline. You will live to see Gertrude Lady Lundie.'



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CHAPTER VII.

LOVE.

THAT was not the last visit Sir William paid at Meadowflats. Before the year was very old, his visits became so frequent as to excite remark. It was at once reported that Caroline's beauty had made a conquest of the master of Castle Lundie, and Rumford gossips were not slow to catch the rumour and talk it threadbare, even before those interested had awakened to the truth of such a rumour. That Gertrude could possibly be any attraction was never for a moment taken into consideration by the gossips. To them she was simply a very sweet and kind-hearted girl, void of pride or affectation, one to be loved much, but not fitted to shine in society.

In all his experience of womankind, and that was considerable, William Lundie had met none like Gertrude Mayne. It was not simply that she was unsophisticated, untainted by the hypocrisy and hollowness of the world, it was the halo of innocence and purity which surrounded her, her maidenly pride and fearlessly expressed contempt and hatred for wrongdoing, her wide and boundless sympathies for every noble and good work.

For one so young she had thought much, and her ideas were matured in no ordinary degree. She was of a still, reticent nature, and it was only by chance, at times, when she was surprised out of her reserve, that she spoke at all freely,

and then the man of the world was amazed. His opinion of womanhood was not particularly high. Perhaps it was not to be wondered at, for, with the exception of his younger sister, whom he had seen but seldom of late years, his acquaintance hitherto had not been with the best of them. In India he had known many who did not keep their marriage vow in the spirit, though they may have been outwardly careful of the letter; he had flirted with other men's wives, and thought nothing of it; his usual tone towards women was, though courteous, mingled somewhat with good-natured scorn. He had not been many times in the society of Gertrude Mayne before he learned that she was a being of another order than the giddy butterflies he had known. She appealed to the better side of the man's nature, and made him review his past life with regret. It was not free from stain; nay, there were many sullied pages, many actions neither honourable nor gentlemanly, which now he could wish undone. He began to wish, for her sake, that he was a better man; in the secret recesses of his soul there sprang up strange, vague yearnings for a nobler life, a higher aim than the mere enjoyment of the present hour. These things could have but one meaning, one result; love, deep, passionate, all-absorbing, for the gentle girl who had thus, as it were, brought him face to face with self.

This was no light thing for William Lundie. He was past the giddy time of youth, when every new face can charm. During the past twenty years he had had many such fancies, had made many promises, only to break them; but this was the love of his life, all the stronger and deeper and more absorbing, that it came to him so late. And so he came to Meadowflats day after day, never for a moment dreaming that his presence was anything but acceptable to the maiden of his choice. Perhaps that was natural also, for in all the forty years of his life he had never brooked the slightest contradiction of his will. Nothing had ever been allowed to stand in the way of his pleasure; he had never experienced the bitterness of having the desire of his heart nipped in the bud. So he came day after day, as I said, and the gossips talked, and Mrs. Mayne rejoiced, and Gertrude remained unconscious that she was the object for which he came. She had been so long accustomed to regard Caroline as far above her, that the idea

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of herself being preferred never occurred. She no longer felt the same uneasiness and dread overwhelm her in the presence of the master of Castle Lundie. His attentions were delicate, and not too pointed to alarm. Indeed, so little distinction did he make between the sisters, that it would have needed a penetrating eye indeed to discern which he favoured most. Mrs. Mayne was at a loss, and if Caroline knew the truth she kept her secret.

During the early weeks of the new year Gertrude saw much of David and Margaret Dunsyre, and often she would meet John Strathearn in Margaret's drawing-room, for of late he seemed to have imbibed a deeper love for Margaret's deliciously flavoured Indian tea. Sometimes Margaret felt miserably jealous; at other times, reassured by the careless indifference of John's manner, she blamed herself for being so foolish. Of course he loved her, otherwise why was he so kind and thoughtful always for her comfort, why did he urge her to come oftener to Redlands? The shrewd eyes of David Dunsyre had read John's secret long ago, but he was too loyal to say anything even to Margaret. And Gertrude? Ah, why did she find these quiet tea-drinkings so sweet? Why did Margaret's drawing-room seem so empty on the days when John did not come? Ah, why indeed? Very soon these questions must be all faithfully asked and as faithfully answered.

In the first week of March the county people took flight to London, and the great houses, Castle Lundie among the rest, were shut up or left in the care of servants. Then it was that Mrs. Mayne did her utmost to follow their example, but for once in his life Franklin-Mayne was firm as a rock with his wife.

'It would simply ruin us, Henrietta,' he said decidedly, 'and Heaven knows we are near enough ruin already.'

'But think, Gilbert, what a chance we may be throwing away. Just when Sir William was on the point of declaring himself, that horrible sister of his had to hurry him away. If we go to London now we may secure him, and Caroline's engagement will be the event of the season,' said Mrs. Mayne eagerly.

'I tell you, Henrietta, you are mistaken. If either of the girls interested Sir William, it was Gertrude, but I fancy he

only came here to amuse himself,' said Franklin-Mayne. 'In any case we are not going to London at present. If the man is in love, he will be back ere long; if not, we are better rid of him.'

Mrs. Mayne was not only annoyed now, she was angry, and the colour came and went upon her cheeks.

'Really, Gilbert Mayne, you are insufferable! After all my toiling and scheming, that I should be balked just when triumph is within my reach!'

'Hush, Henrietta!' said Gilbert Mayne a little sadly. 'You force me to tell the truth. Haven't you seen for yourself that I am failing in health? Dunsyre told me not many days ago my days were numbered. The excitement of such a change would kill me.'

'Oh, nonsense, Gilbert! you are fanciful, the result of this tame existence. You have always been accustomed to excitement, and I believe a change to London is the very thing for you,' said Mrs. Mayne. 'And then you would see Dr. Charteris. I believe Dunsyre doesn't understand your constitution. It is not to be expected that he should.'

'I am quite satisfied with Dunsyre's skill, and with his verdict,' said Franklin-Mayne quietly. 'Try and satisfy yourself at home, Henrietta; and, believe me, to go to London just now would hinder the very thing you want to further. It would look too much like following up the chase.'

'Very well, Gilbert; I suppose you must have your way,' said Mrs. Mayne resignedly; 'only it will be insufferably dull for us when everybody is away.'

The subject was dropped then, but Mrs. Mayne had by no means abandoned all hope of a two months' sojourn in London.

On the afternoon of that same day, Gertrude, with faithful Lion as her guardian, walked across the fields to visit some of her poor people in the Watergate of Rumford. Except in rare instances she took nothing in her hand, and it was evidence of how true a hold she had upon their hearts, that for her own sake she was as welcome in their homes as the beams of the summer sun. She walked slowly, for the air was very pleasant that March afternoon. The day was redolent with the breath of spring; there were green buds on

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hedge and tree, the grass in the lea fields was taking on a greener, fresher tinge, and the rich brown furrows, newly upturned by the plough, smelt fresh and sweet, as if glad to be released from the ice-king's thrall. There were notes of gladness, too, in the soft, mild air; the twittering of the happy, hopeful birds mingled harmoniously with the rush and ripple of the Running Burn, which leapt freely and joyously in its pebbly bed, as if it, too, loved the gentle breath of spring. All these things Gertrude Mayne loved with a keen and passionate love, and her walk was to her the purest enjoyment. Perhaps her heart was beating in time with the glad voice of Nature; of late the world had seemed to her doubly fair. Her way led her directly past the Earn Mills, a vast pile of solid masonry, with four tall chimney-stalks standing out against the calm, bright sky. Her heart beat quicker as she passed the offices, which stood a little apart from the other buildings, for might not the master himself be within?

A narrow and somewhat dingy lane led up from the mills directly into the Watergate, which was the oldest portion of the town—a narrow, dirty, unwholesome street, with tall tenements on either side, blackened by the smoke from the mills. In the Watergate dwelt a thriftless, shiftless lot, chiefly factory workers, male and female, who were either unsteady in their habits, or extravagant and wasteful in their ways. The more respectable class of mill hands now dwelt at the Uppergate, a little township at the east end of the town, upon the Redlands road. The Watergate was indeed a disgrace to a county town, where there was no lack of fresh air and pure water, if the inhabitants would but bestir themselves to take advantage thereof. But the time was coming when the Watergate of Rumford would be a thing of the past, for certain earnest words which had fallen in a moment of enthusiasm from a girl's lips were about to bear their goodly fruit. When Gertrude Mayne entered the lower end of the Watergate that afternoon, she was greatly surprised to see a number of men busily engaged demolishing a house at the upper end.

'Eh, Miss Mayne, my woman, there's to be unco cheenges in the Watergate,' said a voice from the other side of the

street, and a slatternly woman appeared at a low doorway, and set her arms akimbo, prepared to impart all her news.

Gertrude had no liking for the individual who addressed her, as she was a hopeless case of drunkenness and thriftlessness, but she was so anxious to hear particulars of the impending 'cheenges,' that she stepped across to the narrow, uneven pavement and asked the woman to further enlighten her.

'Ay, mem, unco cheenges,' said Peggy Duncan, delighted to find herself of some consequence. 'They say Maister John, o' the Earn Mills,—young Mr. Strathearn, ye ken,—has bocht up the hale Watergate, and a bonny penny it wad cost him, oor man says, auld rickle o' stane an' lime though it be, the way property's selling the noo; an' he's gaun to pu'd a' doon, an' build braw new hooses like the Uppergate, and the rents is to be nae higher. That's what I ca' daein' the thing wise-like.'

'And where are you all to live while these alterations are going on, Mrs. Duncan?' inquired Gertrude, and her voice had taken a softer, sweeter tone, only Peggy was not sufficiently penetrating to discover it.

'That's the best o't a', Miss Mayne; the young maister's gotten the auld Earn Mills (ye ken them, farther up the burn) made into hooses, an' it'll haud the folk on thon side till the new anes be ready. Maister John for invention, as oor man says. He'll no' tak' the better o' puir folk.'

'It will be an immense improvement in the town,' said Miss Mayne quietly. 'Well, good afternoon, Mrs. Duncan; I am going to see Katie Ruthven.'

'Ay, mem, I jaloused as muckle. Katie sets a hantle by ye comin'—sae kind, an' sae does her mither,' said Peggy. 'If there were mair o' your kind among the gentry, puir folk wad be better aff.'

Gertrude smiled, and passed on. The misfortunes and grievances of 'puir folk' was a pet subject with Peggy.

Miss Mayne walked a few yards farther, and then entered a low arched doorway, which gave admittance to all the dwellers in a large tenement. It was dark and gloomy within, but Gertrude's feet, familiar with the curious turns and bends of the staircase, found their way easily to the top. There was some light there, admitted by a skylight in the

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roof. She tapped lightly at one of the doors, and, in answer to a gently spoken 'Come in,' entered with soft footsteps. A little narrow lobby terminated in a wide, low-ceiled room, with one tiny window looking down upon the street. The place was meagrely furnished, but it was clean, and the cheery crackling of the fire gave an air of comfort even to the bare walls and floor.

There was a bed in one corner, and in the other, drawn round towards the window, a comfortable chintz-covered couch, whereon lay the figure of a young girl. Her face was deadly pale, and thin and worn to a degree, but it was sweet and intelligent, and wore an expression of contentment and peace. A glow of pleasure overspread it when Gertrude Mayne stepped lightly across the floor to her side.

'Oh, Miss Gertrude, but I was wearying for ye,' she said as she clasped the offered hand in both her own.

'I am sorry I have been so long this time, Katie, but one thing and another has hindered me. Why, where did you get this splendid sofa?'

'Ye wadna ask whaur I got a' the rest, Miss Gertrude,' said Katie, and her eyes filled. 'Mr. John was here ae day, an' he thoct I wad get tired lyin' i' my bed, and so he sent up this.'

Gertrude turned aside and laid her gloves on the table. She did not care that even Katie should see her eyes at that moment.

'Ye wad see them beginnin' to pu' doon the auld hooses, Miss Gertrude?' said Katie eagerly. 'An' likely ye'll hae heard wha's daein't, an' what great cheenges are to be in the Watergate?'

'Yes, Katie, I have heard,' said Gertrude, and, sitting down on the couch, she looked with radiant eyes into Katie's.

'My, Miss Gertrude, how weel ye look the day! I never saw ye as bonnie,' said Katie impulsively.

A tremulous smile touched for a moment Gertrude's lips.

'A great joy has come to me to-day, Katie; that is perhaps why I look so well,' she said simply. 'But come, tell me how you are. I think you look better.'

'I am better, I think, an' I'll get a' better, I'm thinkin', when I get oot o' this waesome Watergate. Had I been able,

Maister John wad hae haen us oot long ago, but it'll be maun rise when the hoose is to be pu'ed aboot oor ears.'

'I have always thought you would get better if you were in some little cottage away from this murky, unpleasant air,' said Gertrude.

'That's what Maister John says. Eh, Miss Gertrude, he has been a guid freen' to mother an' me, an' a' because faither wrocht sax months in the Earn Mills afore he dee'd. It was an unco handfu' mother was left wi', mind, me no' able to dae a haund's turn for mysel', an' aye needin'. I've whiles wondered what way God didna mak' me strong like ither folk. But Maister John showed me the richt side o' that ae day when I was grumblin' till him.'

'Ay, Katie, we cannot always see the good which lies behind our trials,' said Gertrude, and rose to go.

She wanted to be alone for a little with her own beautiful, happy thoughts. Bidding the invalid girl a kind good-bye, and promising to come again soon, she ran lightly down-stairs and out into the street. It was deserted at that hour, for none of the bairns were home from school, and the slatternly gossips had retired in-doors for their afternoon cup of tea. There was only one person visible in the Watergate—a gentleman wearing a grey tweed suit and cap to match, coming up with easy, swinging gait from the direction of the mills. It needed no second glance to tell Gertrude who it was; her face flushed deep crimson, and for the first time during their six months' acquaintance she could have fled from the presence of John Strathearn. But Lion, recognising a friend, bounded to meet him, and John came forward with his hand laid caressingly on the animal's noble head. There was no mistaking the pleasure on his fine face, and he made no effort to hide it.

'Lion evidently trusts me, Miss Gertrude,' he said pleasantly, and he took the slim hand in his manly grip, wondering a little why the sweet eyes were so persistently turned away. 'May I hope you are going to Miss Dunsyre's to-day?'

'No, I must go home; I only came down to see poor Katie Ruthven, and the walk has done me good. It is such a lovely day,' said Gertrude quietly, and with still averted eyes.

'Yes, it makes one dream of summer,' said John, and his tone was rather disappointed.

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'They have been telling me to-day of the changes you propose to make in the Watergate, Mr. Strathearn,' said Gertrude, feeling even a moment's silence embarrassing. 'Surely Rumford will owe you a debt of gratitude for this.'

'I care nothing for the gratitude of Rumford,' said John quickly. 'I am afraid my motive was more selfish even than to gratify my townsfolk.'

For the first time the great earnest eyes were uplifted inquiringly to his face. They were down-dropped at once, and one slender hand was nervously laid on Lion's stately head. But that look scattered John's prudence to the winds.

'I have never forgotten what you said about this place the first time I had the unspeakable happiness to meet you,' he said quickly. 'The time has now come—whether fortunately or unfortunately for me I cannot tell—when the first word you uttered has become law to me.'

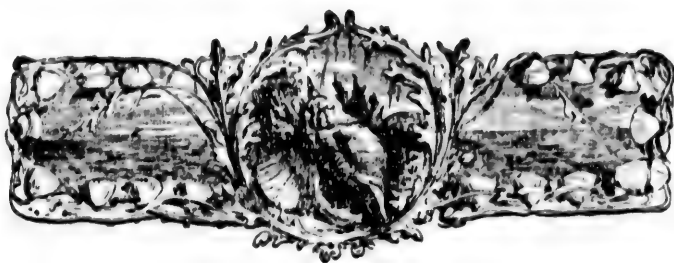
Every vestige of colour died from the face of Gertrude Mayne, and he saw her tremble.

'I—I must go, Mr. Strathearn,' she said hurriedly. 'Good afternoon. Come, Lion.'

Before John was aware she had passed him, and was making her way down the street as if pursued by some evil thing. He smiled slightly, she was so shy, his pure, sweet, girlish love. He thought his rough-and-ready way had startled her, and he went on his way full of hope, picturing the day when that sweet, gentle presence should make the sunshine and the happiness of Redlands.

And Gertrude? Her happy heart found a sweeter note in the music of bird and running brook, the soft, dove-coloured sky seemed roseate-hued, all nature was gilded by the sun of love. So she went upon her happy way, not dreaming that the shadow waited for her at home; that even then other hearts and hands were shaping for her a destiny in which this new, strange, beautiful love had no part.





CHAPTER VIII.

THE SHADOW FALLS.



ERTRUDE lingered upon her homeward way. She was in no haste to exchange the peace and promise of the outside world for the uncongenial, and so often sad, atmosphere of her home. She was in no haste to bury deep her own sweet thoughts in her heart; no, she would be alone for a little with this wonderful truth which had only been revealed to her to-day. She had come very near it many times before, but to-day every shadow seemed swept away, swallowed up and forgotten in the blessedness of the knowledge that John Strathearn loved her. That was enough for her first; then she had no desire to look further than that. She stood long upon the rustic bridge which spanned the Running Burn, and, watching the ripple and flow beneath, thought of John's manliness, of his goodness, of his tenderness and thoughtfulness. The testimony of all who knew him was that he was the best and noblest of men. His name in Rutford was synonymous with everything fair and honourable and upright; and even the veriest scandal-mongers and backbiters in the place had no word to say against him. And to this man, honoured, beloved, revered above his fellows, *she* was unspeakably dear. Oh, young love! strange, sweet madness! thou art indeed the very elixir of life; thou hast no equal; no second like unto thee!

Dusk found her still upon the bridge across the Running

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Burn. Lion, tugging at her skirts, and the gleam of lights in the windows of her father's house, warned her she was lingering too long. She had watched, yet without comprehending, the ploughmen with their teams leaving the furrowed fields, their labour ended for the day. She had counted the strokes of six as they came pealing from the town clock through the still and quiet air. A mist had come down upon the earth, obscuring the light of day, and the dusk fell before its time.

'Lion, my pet! your mistress is day-dreaming, doggie, and she is so happy,' she said, when she roused herself to obey her companion's summons home. 'But what will they say to me at home, I wonder? I think my doggie will make my excuses to them, for he knows all about it.'

Lion wagged his tail furiously, gave a sharp bark of delight, and bounded on towards the stile, his mistress following now with hastening feet.

As she walked quietly through the shrubbery she heard the sharp click of hoofs dying away in the distance. Some rider had evidently just left the house. She entered by the folding library window, which looked out upon the shrubbery, and was but seldom locked. From thence she stole up to her own room, to make a hasty toilet, for seven o'clock was the dinner-hour at Meadowflats. While she was brushing out her hair her mother entered the room. She was already dressed, and Gertrude, turning round, fearing her displeasure, beheld her face radiant and satisfied.

'My child, where have you been so late?' she asked, with suave kindness of manner.

'I was visiting Katie Ruthven, a poor girl in the Watergate, mamma. No, I have not been at Margaret's to-day,' replied Gertrude. 'But I stayed too long on the way home. It was so mild and sweet, and everything was so pleasant. I am very sorry if you are vexed.'

'I am not vexed, my dear; only it will not do to wander alone over the countryside at nights now. See'—

Mrs. Mayne suddenly checked herself, but Gertrude did not observe anything peculiar.

'This is likely to be a great day in your destiny, Gertrude,' said Mrs. Mayne, fanning herself gracefully, while she watched Gertrude's white hands deftly braiding her soft hair. 'Sir

William Lundie has been here—came all the way from London expressly for the purpose of coming here ;—but then—I promised your father not to say anything about it. Come away down, my dear ; I think dinner waits.’

‘But he is away again, mamma,’ said Gertrude, with paling lips. ‘He will not dine with us to-night?’

‘No, no, dear ; don’t flatter yourself. He has just gone, and will not be back until to-morrow. But there, if I stay I *must* tell you, so I’ll run away, my dear, sweet, fortunate child,’ said Mrs. Mayne, and with a sudden rush of affection she bent forward and kissed Gertrude’s cheek. Then she went away, and Gertrude made haste to complete her toilet, but her fingers trembled so that they could scarcely fasten the silver necklet round her throat. That something unusual had happened she was forced to believe, but she could only dread what that something was, fearing lest it should very nearly concern her.

When she entered the dining-room she found her father and mother already seated. Caroline had gone to spend the day at the neighbouring town of Blairshiels, and was not expected home until the late train. Franklin-Mayne rose to place a chair for Gertrude, and when she looked up to thank him she saw that his face bore traces of deep emotion ; also the hand grasping the chair seemed to tremble. It was from her father Gertrude had inherited that sensitive nervousness, that highly-strung and excitable temperament, which to its possessor is fraught at times with keenest pain.

‘I fancied Sir William looking so well,’ said Mrs. Mayne, whose mind seemed concentrated on one theme. ‘I told him he looked years younger—didn’t you think so, dear?’ she added to her husband.

‘Indeed I did not, Henrietta. I have always thought Lundie looked his age to the full,’ replied Franklin-Mayne. ‘Well, my love,’ he said to Gertrude, with a strange, yearning tenderness of look and tone, ‘had you a pleasant walk into town to-day?’

‘Very, papa,’ answered Gertrude, toying listlessly with the food on her plate. ‘Do you know the Watergate is to be pulled down and rebuilt?’

‘Ay, I heard something about it from Dunsyre some little

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time ago,' replied Franklin-Mayne. 'Young Strathearn has taken the thing in hand, so it will be well done. He has both means and common sense at his command.'

'It is natural that these mill people should delight to spend their money where they have made it, and a right and proper thing as well,' said Mrs. Mayne, with an air of superiority. 'Mrs. Moredun was saying to me the other day that young Strathearn and Margaret Dunsyre are to make a match of it. Very suitable for both parties. Has she never spoken of it to you, Gertrude?'

'Never, mamma. These things are not discussed between Margaret and me,' Gertrude forced herself to reply.

'What models of propriety you must be!' laughed Mrs. Mayne. 'Well, dear, if you are quite done, we will have dessert in. Gertrude, you have eaten positively nothing. Had you anything in Rumford?'

'No, mamma; but I am quite satisfied.'

'This will never do. If you grow thin and pale I shall be taken to task,' she said, with the same coquettish air of mystery so painful and exasperating to an uninitiated listener. Again that strange dread swept over Gertrude. She looked almost appealingly into her father's face.

'Be quiet, Henrietta, and don't talk so foolishly,' he said to his wife, in rather irritable tones.

On ordinary occasions Mrs. Mayne would have answered back as irritably, but she only smiled sweetly and nodded approvingly. Surely she possessed some secret which could take the sting from every disagreeable word or look.

Franklin-Mayne did not linger at the table. At the earliest possible moment he rose, and saying to Gertrude he would like to speak with her for a little, he left the room.

Gertrude did not long remain behind. When she entered the library she found her father standing leaning against the mantel with a worried and careworn look on his face. Of late that look had been seldom lacking, and it was mingled sometimes with another expression, which seemed to tell of physical pain borne without a murmur.

'Papa, dear, what is it? What has happened? What does mamma mean when she speaks like that?' she asked appealingly

Franklin-Mayne drew his daughter to his side, fondly kissed her brow, and placed her in a chair.

'My darling, a momentous thing for you happened to-day. I have had the honour and satisfaction to receive an offer for your hand,' he said, and somehow he did not care just then to look upon Gertrude's face. 'As you have been made aware of Sir William Lundie's visit to-day, my love,' he continued, beginning to walk restlessly up and down the floor, 'it is more than likely you will at once guess that the proposal came from him. He is coming to-morrow for his answer either from you or me. What is it to be?'

He glanced towards Gertrude now, but her face was hidden in her hands.

'There is no need for me to say with what pride and joy I should see my darling made Lady Lundie,' continued Franklin-Mayne. 'The world will regard you as the most fortunate of women, and with cause. Sir William Lundie is a gentleman, and a generous-hearted man, and he loves you truly. Of that I was abundantly convinced to-day.'

'I am aware that there is some slight disparity in years between you,' he said, after another slight pause, 'but the difference is not so great but that love can bridge it. Come, look up, my pet, and let me see the face of the future Lady Lundie.'

But the bowed figure in the chair never moved, nor was the sweet, wan face uplifted from the protecting hands.

'As you know, my darling, I am no longer so young nor so strong as I was; in fact, my constitution is undermined, and I cannot hope for many more years of life. You know, too, my love, and have often lightened them with your sweet sympathy, the monetary and worldly cares which oppress me. Gertrude, your marriage with Sir William Lundie will substantially remove the greatest of these, which is anxiety about the future of my wife and daughters. When the first surprise has worn away, I am sure you will not only be pleased, but charmed with your prospects, and justly so. Any woman might be proud to be the wife of Sir William Lundie.'

'But if I do not love Sir William Lundie, papa, how can I be his wife?' asked Gertrude at length, in a strange, quiet

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voice, quite unlike her own. 'It is a sin, is it not, to marry for any motive but love?'

A sad smile touched the lips of Franklin-Mayne.

'When I was young, my darling, I thought as you do, but now I know that love without the more solid basis of worldly comfort cannot bring happiness, but the reverse. Better marry well, even if that mad passion called love is lacking, than plunge into misery from which there is no recall.'

Gertrude rose, and the delicate lace at throat and wrists was not more colourless than her face. Also her limbs trembled, and she was obliged to stretch out one hand unsteadily to the table for support.

'If you will let me go away now, papa. I cannot bear any more just now,' she said feebly. 'I will think of what you say. I will try to do right, and God will show me the way.'

At that moment the door was noiselessly opened, and Mrs. Mayne fluttered into the room.

'You have told her now, Gilbert dear? Let me kiss my darling child. Let me hold in my arms the future Lady Lundie, mistress of Castle Lundie, Stoke Abbey, and Lundie House, Piccadilly,' she exclaimed, as if she had been conning these inspiring words in her mind for long. 'What is the matter, my pet? Overcome with your good fortune, eh? I do not wonder at it.'

The room swam round Gertrude Mayne. A confused din and singing sounded in her ears, and she remembered no more. Let her lie, proud, heartless mother, and over-anxious yet half-remorseful father, let her lie. Better unconsciousness than consciousness now, for the light of hope and youth and love is quenched for ever!




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CHAPTER IX.

THE WISDOM OF THE WORLD.

ERTRUDE MAYNE awoke from what seemed to be a long sleep to find the sun streaming in at her window, and yet she had no remembrance of having gone to bed, or even of having come upstairs. As she lay in the stillness, which was broken only by the twitter of a pair of swallows in the eaves, the events of the past day slowly came back to her mind. And then the brightness died out of the sunshine, the music from the sweet twitterings outside, and it was as if a grey darkness lay over all. She turned her face to the wall, too miserable and crushed to wonder even about the hour, or whether any one was stirring in the house.

But presently the quiet was disturbed. A hasty footfall came along the corridor, the door was eagerly opened, and the faint perfume of rose-water, and the flutter of ribbons and flounced skirts, proclaimed Mrs. Mayne's presence in the room even before she spoke.

'My darling child, are you awake?' she asked in a whisper. 'Ah yes, my pet, I hope you are better. You must be after such a long sound sleep. Do you know it is nearly eleven, and Sir William, impatient man, is to be here at one, or not later than two. Now, what will you have for breakfast?'

'Nothing, mamma,' said Gertrude wearily. 'Couldn't I lie still all day? I feel too weak to move.'

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'My dear, you shall have a cup of tea and an egg, with buttered toast, in bed, and I shall let you lie till positively the last minute,' said Mrs. Mayne fussily. 'And then you will put on that sweet white cashmere morning-gown of Caroline's, and go down to the drawing-room, just a few minutes before Sir William comes. And whenever we all go down to lunch, my love, you will come back to bed again. Will that do, eh?'

'I need not go down to-day, mamma,' said Gertrude.

'My dear, you must. You belong to Sir William now, my love.'

'Mamma, how can you say that terrible thing?' interposed Gertrude passionately. 'I have not promised to be his wife. I shall never promise. I do not love him, and I can never be his wife.'

'My love, you are not quite well yet,' said the wily mother, laying a soothing hand on the girl's flushed brow. 'We will not say more about it now, but I will run and see about your breakfast.'

'Is Caroline home, and where is papa?' asked Gertrude listlessly.

'Yes, Caroline is home, writing letters, I believe. Your father has gone to the town. He said he would be back at noon.'

'Could Caroline bring me my breakfast, mamma? Will you please ask her?' said Gertrude wistfully.

'My love, of course! she will be only too happy,' said Mrs. Mayne, and left the room to order the slight repast.

In a quarter of an hour Caroline entered, carrying the little tray, which she set on the table and came over to the bed.

'I am here, Gertrude. What can I do for you?' she asked kindly.

'Just sit down beside me, Caroline,' said Gertrude. 'I wish you could help me, for I am very wretched.'

'Why are you wretched? You ought to be proud and happy, as I would be were I in your place,' said Caroline, with a slight smile. 'But now you must take this, or mamma will be up scolding presently.'

With real kindness, and wonderful gentleness of look and manner for the haughty Caroline, she arranged the pillows

round her sister, and brought the tray. Gertrude ate sparingly, and at last begged Caroline to take it away, and come and talk to her again.

'I don't understand you, Gertrude. What is there in the brilliant prospect opening up before you to make you so ill and unhappy?' she said wonderingly.

'I don't know,' said Gertrude wearily. 'Oh, Caroline, do you think they will make me do it?'

'Don't talk that way, dear. Papa and mamma are evidently bent upon it, but the days are gone when girls can be forced to marry. If you positively refuse, no power on earth can make you do it.'

'Do *you* like Sir William Lundie?' asked Gertrude suddenly.

'What has that to do with it, dear? I am not to marry him,' said Caroline evasively.

'There—I knew you didn't like him. I have often seen your lip curl when he was present. How would you like to pass your life with him?'

'Gertrude, I would marry Sir William Lundie to-morrow if I got the chance, though I hated him worse than I do,' said Caroline bitterly,—'just to get away from this wretched life.'

'I never thought you were wretched, Caroline!' said Gertrude, with wondering compassion, for it seemed that never till to-day had she known her sister.

'Wretched? Don't you think I can feel as well as you the miserable deceit of our lives, only I can control my face better than you, and smile when I feel it most,' said Caroline. 'If you are wise, Gertrude, you will marry Sir William Lundie as soon as possible. I believe papa will be bankrupt ere long, and then what will become of us? Sir William would save his wife's relations from disgrace for his own sake, if not for hers. It will be easy for you to be happy with him, for it will cost you nothing to give him what he requires, and he will have all his own way. With my proud, passionate temper, it would be different; we would quarrel at the very outset of our married life.'

'Caroline, I thought it was *you* he cared for,' said Gertrude suddenly.

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'So did I till lately; and though I would willingly have accepted him, it is no great disappointment.'

'Caroline, do you think it right to marry one man when you care for another with all your heart?' asked Gertrude, with slightly flushing face.

'But you cannot care for another,' said Caroline sharply.

'I am afraid I do,' said Gertrude, and her eyes filled with tears. Then she told her sister how she loved John Strathearn, and how she was parted from him now apparently for ever.

'The man has been playing with you, amusing himself with you, because you are simple and young,' said Caroline hotly. 'Why, do you know he is to marry Margaret Dunsyre? The very date is fixed, I am told, my poor little sister!'

'I will not believe it. He could not deceive me so,' cried Gertrude rebelliously. 'I will ask him.'

'Hush, my pet, you know nothing of this deceitful world,' said Caroline soothingly. 'If you will take my advice, you will banish all thought of this handsome cotton-spinner from your heart, and make up your mind to love your future husband. Why, the glory of being Lady Lundie, the pleasure of being mistress of so many stately homes, is worth a little misery, is it not? And very soon you will learn to find your chief joy in the duties and privileges of your high position, which will give you entrance to the first society.'

Gertrude wearily sank back among her pillows, and the long lashes drooped over the white cheeks. Her faith was shaken. Caroline's few grave words had done what all the mother's half-angry, half-playful remonstrances could never have accomplished. And Sir William's suit was nearly won.

'You think yourself the most miserable being in the world, I know,' said Caroline. 'But others suffer as well as you. Do you know I sent away a man who truly loved me, and whom I loved, because I hoped to win the prize which is now within your reach?'

Gertrude, in the greatness of her amazement, opened wide her eyes. That Caroline should ever have had such an experience, and should confess it, was but additional proof that hitherto they had been strangers to each other. Ay, many black tragedies of which we do not dream take place daily in our midst.

'Oh, Caroline, who was it? how could you do it?' exclaimed Gertrude.

'It was Doctor Dunsyre; and I have told you my motive. I could do much worse things than that if I saw sufficient cause,' said Caroline, with outward composure. But she rose then, and walking over to the window stood looking out upon the sunlit landscape. And in the proud dark eyes lay the pitiful shadow of the yearning, regretful pain which filled her heart.

For the moment Gertrude was forgotten, and she remembered only a moonlit evening not a month gone, a man's earnest face, lit by deep emotion, the tones of a manly voice pleading a deep, true, and tender love, offering her his heart and home, and a devotion such as fair woman loves. And she had looked him straight in the face, with eyes which did not falter, and answered no. David Dunsyre expected, as he had a right to expect, a different answer, but he took his dismissal without a word. It was the first and last time, he told himself, that a woman should so humble him, and he would keep his word. Then he folded down that page in his history, and vowed he would never turn it again with the finger of regret or of hope. But we make many vows, the folly of which time often makes plain, and that sometimes when it is too late. The world knew nothing of the result of his wooing, for it had never known of his love. When I say the world, I include Margaret, for, fond as he was of his sister, there were some things Doctor Dunsyre did not tell her.

Again Mrs. Mayne came bustling into the room, and Caroline at once left it.

'How are you now, dear child? Ah, I think you look better! Well, it is almost one, so I think you will rise and go down to the drawing-room, will you?'

'Just as you like,' said Gertrude listlessly.

She was passive now in their hands. So she allowed herself to be attired in the dainty white robe, and obediently followed her mother down to the drawing-room. Mrs. Mayne was delighted.

'My love, I knew you would be your own sweet self when you were better in health,' she said, with effusive fondness.

'There, my love, compose yourself, while I go and see that

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lunch is quite ready. You look charming, interesting, lovely. Sir William will fall in love again when he sees you.'

So saying, Mrs. Mayne fluttered from the room, and Gertrude buried her face in the soft cushions, and wished herself a child again, or a light-hearted school-girl, to whom home and grown-up life, in the enchantment of distance, seemed fairyland indeed. Oh, how different the reality!—a land of shadows and pain, when every day seemed to add another care to the weary heart.

The sound of voices and footsteps outside made her start nervously to her feet. Looking through the window, she saw her father and the master of Castle Lundie walking to and fro the terrace in close conversation. Doubtless she was the subject of their talk, her destiny the theme of absorbing interest to them both. Sick and weary at heart, she crept back to her couch, and prayed that the way might be made plain to her. Filial love and duty, unselfishness of disposition, the desire to do the most and the best in her power for those she loved, waged fierce war with every impulse of her heart. She heard them enter the house at length—heard their footsteps on the stair, and the opening of the drawing-room door. Then, as in a dream, the tones of her father's voice fell upon her ears.

'My dear love, Sir William Lundie is here, and would speak with you for a few minutes,' said Franklin-Mayne nervously. 'Sir William, you see my daughter does not look very robust. She is young, and your proposal took her by surprise. I would beg you not to needlessly agitate or distress her.'

'You may rely upon me,' said the master of Castle Lundie; and then Gertrude was conscious that she was alone with the man whom fate seemed to will should be her future husband. She slightly raised herself, and with a strange, calm composure looked him in the face. That look seemed to read him through and through. She saw the tall, spare figure, with its inherited grace of carriage and mien, the thin, sallow face, the resolute mouth, and keen black eyes, the high white forehead, with its masses of iron-grey hair; then her eyes fell, and a shudder ran through her frame. For the old distrust, the vague dread which could not be put into words, came back to

her with added strength. To be his wife! To live under his roof-tree, to sit at his table, to be his for all time! These thoughts filled her soul with unutterable loathing.

'I trust your father has not needlessly buoyed me up with the hope that the greatest desire of my life is about to be fulfilled,' he said gently, yet with deep earnestness. 'Gertrude, he may have told you of that desire, but he could not tell you of the love which prompted it. I love you as a man loves but once in life. Will you be my wife?'

For a moment Gertrude did not speak. The impulse was strong upon her to send him from her then and for ever, but again Caroline's words—'I believe papa will ere long be a bankrupt, and Sir William would save his wife's relatives from disgrace;' and yet again her father's careworn face, his entreating words, ay, even the very glance of pleading he had cast upon her as he left the room—sealed her lips. It seemed years since yesterday, when she had met John Strathearn and read in his face the love he would not utter yet. And he was false, they said. He had looked at her with those eyes while his heart and plighted honour were given to another. She would not believe it against him yet. She would see him again before she passed her word to the man waiting at her side. These thoughts flashed through her mind in a moment, and then she lifted her eyes to the face of William Lundie.

'You have done me a great honour, Sir William,' she said gently. 'Will you give me another day—only one—to consider? It was so sudden, so unexpected, and that is a very little thing to ask.'

'I would be less than a man to refuse such a request from these sweet lips,' said Sir William almost passionately, for he was very much in love, and could scarcely refrain from clasping the fragile, girlish figure to his heart. 'Only do not, I beg you, keep me longer in suspense. When a man's love is like mine it is very impatient. I am not without hope now, however, and I trust that at no distant day Castle Lundie will welcome its young and lovely mistress.'

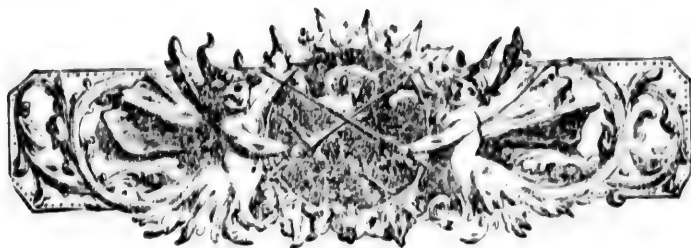
At that moment the luncheon bell rang, and, to Gertrude's relief, Sir William left the room. As he turned to go he took one white hand and raised it to his lips.

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'Soon, very soon, I hope that fair hand will be mine,' he said gallantly, 'and then I shall have the right to kiss the sweet lips which gave it to me.'

A burning blush overspread the girl's fair face, and she turned away from him with a petulant motion which made him smile. He liked the coyness, the shy, maidenly shame which encompassed her. Yes, Sir William Lundie was well pleased with his choice, and, having no doubt now about the issue of his suit, he went down-stairs and made himself particularly agreeable to his future relatives, and Mrs. Mayne thoroughly enjoyed her lunch, for her mind was filled with triumph, with pleasing visions of the future. Surely the star of fortune had risen now above the house of Meadowflats.





CHAPTER X.

TOO LATE !

WHEN John Strathearn left Gertrude that afternoon he did not go to Margaret's, as he had intended. He simply walked to the upper end of the Watergate, looked carelessly at the progress they were making with the demolition of the crazy tenements, then went back to the mill for his letters. The manager, who came to him on something connected with the machinery, found him absent-minded and uninterested, a state of mind he never remembered to have seen in the young master before.

'Ay, ay, I'll see about it to-morrow, Donaldson,' he said carelessly, and, clapping his hat on his head, left the office, and went away home. He had not brought his horse down that morning ; on fine, mild days, when the roads were good and the atmosphere pleasant, he preferred walking to riding, and a three-mile was just child's play to stalwart John. As he walked leisurely along between the hedgerows, which were already tinged with green, he pondered many things in his mind. He had committed himself that day, wisely or unwisely he could not tell, and he was in honour bound to declare himself openly now. So upon the morrow he resolved he would go to Meadowflats and ask permission from Gilbert Franklin-Mayne to pay his addresses to his daughter. From the old man himself he had nothing to fear. He knew him as a kindly, frank, unostentatious being, who would not

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willingly hurt a fellow-creature. It was the mother, the proud, assuming, patronising dame, whose ambitious strivings after position were so well known—she it was he had the most cause to dread. She would doubtless consider it presumption, one of Rumford millowners to ask the hand of a Franklin-Mayne; it would be a bitter pill for her pride to swallow, unless the rich gilding of the millowner's wealth could sweeten it to her taste. The ordeal to be faced was not pleasant, but love would help him through.

And then he gave himself up to lovely hopes and visions which clustered round the thought of Gertrude. When she was his wife—thrilling, rapturous thought!—how he would care for her and shelter her, surrounding her with every luxury, everything of beauty and costliness which love could suggest and money could buy. And oh, what a home that sweet and gentle presence would make of the dreary house of Redlands! What sunshine of happiness she would shed about her where she dwelt! All these things, and many, very many more than I could write of, rose up in sweet succession before the mind of John Strathearn, fragile, beautiful dreams, which would rise only to be dispelled.

Six o'clock was the dinner-hour at Redlands, and as old Mr. Strathearn was punctual and fidgety to a minute, John was never behind. The old man was very exact and ceremonious in his habits, and he still dressed for dinner every day, and was as particular about his toilet—indeed, more so than his son. John often teased him about it, saying he was a dandy in his old age. Then the old man would laugh, and say it was all done out of respect for John himself. They were very happy together, father and son, and if the old man's love for his 'dear lad' partook of the nature of idolatry, it can be forgiven. He was all he had, and was to him the best and most devoted of sons.

It was five minutes to six that evening when John entered the house. He hung up his hat, and walked into the little parlour where his father spent the best part of his time, reading and smoking, and wearying for John to come home. The old man was an inveterate smoker. John himself did not care for it, though he often took a cigar of an evening to keep his father company.

The parlour was the cosiest little room in the house. It was furnished in substantial rosewood and crimson damask. A quaint rosewood bookcase, with cabinet below, filled one end of the room. There was also a comfortable-looking lounge with a bear-skin over it, where the old man took his afternoon nap. A big old-fashioned easy-chair stood upon each side of the hearth. Beside one stood a smoker's table, whereon were ranged pipes of various size and kind, cigar-cases, and tobacco-pouches, and every other requirement for the smoker. A small round table, covered by a crimson cloth, stood in the middle of the floor; the wide, low window was hung with crimson curtains, which gave the place a snug and comfortable appearance. There were a few good engravings in Oxford frames on the walls, chiefly of animals and hunting scenes; the latter John's choice.

This room was the favourite resort of both gentlemen, and, though the dining-room fire was on all day, it was seldom entered except at meal times. When John looked into the parlour his father was standing on the hearth warming his hands at the cheery fire. He had but newly left his dressing-room, and was faultlessly attired in broadcloth and shining, spotless linen. John looked rather ruefully at his own rough tweeds.

'I say, father, I've no time to dress,' was his cheery greeting. 'Will you let me sit down with you in this garb?'

'Of course I will, lad,' said the old man, wheeling round, for he had not heard John enter. 'But why do you stay so long down at the mill, and leave yourself so little time? Is Donaldson not doing so well as he did, that you are so closely tied?'

'Oh, Donaldson's all right. The blame is mine,' said John. 'There's the gong with the first stroke of six. I wonder if Marjorie was ever a minute behind in her life. She will be horrified at me sitting down to eat in this heathenish garb. Come, then.'

John gave his arm to his father, and they went to the dining-room.

Marjorie always waited upon the gentlemen herself. John had frequently remonstrated with her, asking what the other girls were good for, but Marjorie remained firm.

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'When I'm no' able, Maister John, it'll be time enouch for ane o' thae glaiket lassies tae handle yer meat. Be very thankfu' that I'm able an' willint,' she had said once when the subject was under discussion, and that had put an end to it.

She *did* look rather reproachfully at her young master's grey tweeds, and gave her head a slight toss as she ladled out the soup.

'I see your ominous frown, Marjorie,' he said, with a twinkle in his eye. 'Out with it.'

'The mill's surely thrang enoo that ye canna get time to clean yersel' afore dinner-time,' she said drily. 'Jist look at the auld maister, at his time o' life too. He micht be a lesson to ye.'

John laughed outright. He always enjoyed Marjorie's quaint ways, and permitted considerable licence in speech. But Marjorie knew her place very well, and never transgressed the bounds of respect. But as she looked upon the father and son as her ain, a sacred charge left her by her mistress, she thought it her bounden duty to keep them both right, and also to sustain all the honour of the house of Redlands. When dessert was brought in, she retired, and the two had a chat together there over the affairs of the day; for nothing was done at the mill without the old master's knowledge and consent. Although during the great part of the year he was unable to drive even the length of the town, his interest never for a moment flagged, and he was as keen and long-sighted in business as of yore. John was always willing to humour him, although there were little things connected with the working of the huge concern which he often kept back, knowing they would only annoy and distress him. Dinner over, they retired to the parlour, where both felt more at home. John drew in his father's easy-chair, filled his pipe for him, and the old man often said he got the best smoke out of that filling; then he lighted his own cigar, and the two puffed away together in silence for a little.

'This is rare comfortable, lad,' said the old man, stretching out his feet in perfect enjoyment. 'I just weary for this time to come; it's the best part of the day.'

'I believe it is, dad,' said John a little absently, for his thoughts were elsewhere. He longed to tell his father of his love, to confide in that faithful heart all the hopes and fears

inseparable from that love, to get the advice and sympathy he had never yet craved in vain. And, after all, had he not a right to be told, for the advent of a mistress was a matter of vital interest to the old man, for she could make or mar the happiness and comfort of his last days. Oh, but Gertrude would make a dear, kind daughter, as she would make a sweet and winsome wife; and again the lover's thoughts soared into the shadowy land of dreams and visions, until his father's voice recalled him.

'What are you thinking of, John? Anything troubling you, eh?'

'Not exactly; but I want to tell you something, dad,' said John; and, knocking the ash from his cigar, he laid it on the mantel, and, leaning both his arms on his knees, looked into his father's face.

'Ay, ay, lad, tell away; whatever concerns you concerns me, you know. Out with it!'

'Do you remember speaking to me before the New Year, father, about getting a wife,' said John slowly.

The old man nodded, and looked with some eagerness into John's face.

'You laughed at me then, but you've thought better of it, I see,' he said, with a sly smile. 'Isn't that it?'

'I am not sure but that I was thinking better of it even then,' said John, 'only you fixed upon the wrong lady, father.'

The old man leaned forward suddenly, and the expression on his face became one of keen anxiety. He had not dreamed of this, and as Margaret Dunsyre was the only young lady who had ever been on intimate terms at Redlands, he was rather puzzled.

'The wrong lady, John! If you are thinking of a wife, who can it be but Margaret Dunsyre?' he said, in troubled tones.

'There are many other girls in Runford and out of it besides Margaret Dunsyre, and you know I have always said it was only as a sister I cared for her,' said John quickly. 'But you need not be anxious, father; I am sure, when you see the woman, the woman I love, you will say I have chosen wisely and well.'

'Who is she, John? Do I know her? Tell me her name,' asked the old man nervously, interlacing his fingers together.

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you have never seen her,' said John. 'Her name is Gertrude; she is the second daughter of Franklin-Mayne of Meadowflats.'

'Franklin-Mayne; that must be Gilbert Franklin-Mayne. I knew his brother George very well; a fine fellow, but he is dead,' said the old man. 'A good family, but poor—very poor; but you have enough for both. Well, my lad, I hope you will be very happy in your choice. What I said to you the last day we spoke on the subject I say still. Remember the old man is in your hands. You will bring your little girl to see me, John? Oh, my dear lad, I will love her very dearly for my son's sake!'

He stretched out his hand, and John took it in his strong right hand, and reverently raised it to his lips.

'Thank you, dad,' he said, and his own eyes were not dry. 'But what do you suppose they will say to me to-morrow when I go to Meadowflats? I am not of an old family, and we are only mill-people, you know, and the Franklin-Maynes are county gentry.'

'The Franklin-Maynes are very small gentry,' said the old man, with dry scorn. 'Don't you go too humble, my son. You are as good a man as any Franklin-Mayne that ever lived—a better in my eyes.'

John smiled slightly. It was but natural that his father's opinion should differ slightly from that of Mrs. Franklin-Mayne.

'We will hope that they may think with you, dad,' he said, with cheerfulness. 'Well, enough of that subject for to-night. Shall I get the chessmen and beat you again to-night?'

'Yes; but is it to-morrow you are going?'

'Some time to-morrow, dad; you know I was always an impulsive chap who couldn't bear suspense,' answered John as he rose to get the chessmen from the cabinet.

The subject was not mentioned again between them, but it was none the less the absorbing interest of both minds, and their game lacked its usual keen relish. The old man retired to rest at his usual early hour, but John himself sat far into the night. The coming day was to be full of issues for weal or woe. He went down to the mill at the usual hour, followed by his father's heartfelt God-speed and earnest prayers. The

manager claimed his promised attention to the machinery, and the forenoon was gone before he knew where he was. At one o'clock he went up to the County Hotel for a bit of luncheon, and then set off, striding like a man who had an aim in view, up the burn road, across the bridge, and over the fields to Meadowflats, where he arrived just when the ladies had finished luncheon.

He asked for the master of the house, and the maid who admitted him showed him into the library, and took his card to the dining-room. In spite of his natural nervousness at the approaching ordeal, John cast his eyes with interest about the room, for here, doubtless, his beloved spent much of her time. It was a quaint, low-ceiled room, with oak panellings and beautifully-carved oaken roof. The well-lined bookshelves contained many curious and valuable volumes, and the room was filled with antique furniture and rare articles of vertu, such as are found in old family houses. The only modern thing was a cottage piano, open, with a song of Schubert's on the stand. While John was occupied in scanning his surroundings, the door was opened with a peculiar flourish, and to his dismay Mrs. Franklin-Mayne fluttered airily into the room.

'Ah, good morning! Mr. Strathearn of the Earn Mills, I think?' she said, with gracious condescension, and looking at the card poised coquettishly between her fingers. 'What *can* I do for you? Charmed, I am sure, to see you.'

'I asked for Mr. Franklin-Mayne, Mrs. Mayne,' said John, acknowledging her salutation with dignity and manly grace.

'Ah, so the girl said, I think, but he has, ah, unfortunately for you, gone to spend the day at Castle Lundie,' said Mrs. Mayne impressively. 'But I was thinking I might do as well, at least that I might convey any message from you. Pray sit down, Mr. Strathearn. I assure you I seem to know you quite well. My dear friend the Honourable Mrs. Moredun often talks of you, and of your many good works. And I am sure, if you wish Mr. Franklin-Mayne to head a subscription list, I can speak for him, and say he will be charmed.'

John, who knew very well the pecuniary difficulties of the Franklin-Maynes, could scarcely repress a smile.

'I assure you I came on no such errand, Mrs. Mayne,' he

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said courteously. 'As my business is with Mr. Mayne, I will not further intrude upon your time.'

'Oh, nonsense! do sit down, and let me order a glass of wine for you,' said Mrs. Mayne, who had no intention of allowing him to go until she had electrified him with her glorious news. 'I fear Mr. Mayne will be likely to be much occupied for some time to come, owing to the approaching auspicious event, which will break up our family circle.'

John bowed, but remained standing.

'Probably I may have the good fortune to meet him by chance some day soon,' he said rather stupidly. 'I will wish you good morning, Mrs. Mayne.'

'Must you really go? Ah, well, I suppose gentlemen's time is always occupied. I say to Sir William sometimes that when he is married he will have less time than ever,' said Mrs. Mayne. 'I suppose you must have heard that Castle Lundie and Meadowflats are to be more closely united at no distant day?'

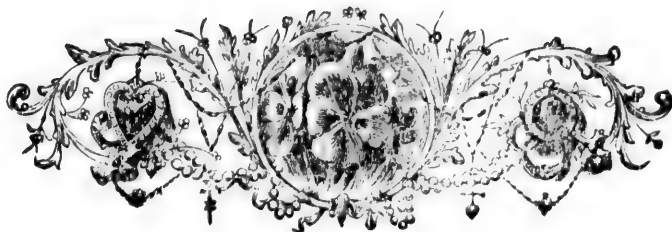
'I have not heard,' said John, courteously still, though his heart's blood seemed suddenly to gather about his heart, and his face visibly paled.

'Indeed, I thought my second daughter's engagement to Sir William Lundie would be the talk of the town *by this time*,' said Mrs. Mayne, unable any longer to contain herself. 'If it is not, you need not regard it as a secret, for it is probable that the marriage will take place very soon.'

'I am honoured by Mrs. Mayne's confidence, and I wish Miss Gertrude and Sir William Lundie every happiness,' said John steadily, though his face was still deadly pale. God knew how awful was the effort to preserve that outward calmness of demeanour.

'I am sure you do. Every one must who knows them,' said Mrs. Mayne sweetly. 'Well, *good morning*. So sorry Mr. Franklin-Mayne could not see you to-day. *Pray* come again any time that you wish to see him.'

John bowed, scarcely touched the begemmed white fingers graciously extended to him, and abruptly left the room and the house. The world, so fair an hour ago, was black and desolate indeed. But we will leave him to battle with his pain—alone.



CHAPTER XL.

HIS PROMISED WIFE.

THAT was young Strathearn of the Earn Mills, Caroline,' said Mrs. Mayne, when she returned to the dining-room. Happily Gertrude had not come down-stairs to luncheon, and was thus unaware of John's visit. Caroline visibly started.

'What did he want, mamma?'

'Something with your father; he did not say what. Really, he is a very handsome fellow, and quite a gentleman. He seemed quite astonished when I mentioned Gertrude's engagement to him.'

'Did you actually tell him that, mamma? Was it not premature?' asked Caroline quickly.

'Why premature? It is nearly settled,' said Mrs. Mayne sharply.

'And what did Mr. Strathearn say?'

'My love, he is too thorough a gentleman to make any comment. He simply expressed his polite congratulations and went away,' said Mrs. Mayne. 'I wonder when Sir William and your father will be here.'

'I don't know,' said Caroline, rising. As she was about to leave the room she laid her hand on her mother's arm and looked impressively in her face.

'Mamma, I would advise you not to mention young Strathearn's visit to Gertrude.'

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'Dear me, why not?'

'I cannot say; only believe me it would not further Sir William's suit. Take my advice, I am seldom at fault in such matters.'

'I know you are not, but that is a most extraordinary thing! What can young Strathearn have to do with Gertrude and Sir William's suit?'

'More perhaps than you imagine. Mother, only take my advice and all will go well,' said Caroline meaningly, and left the room.

Mrs. Mayne was considerably mystified, but she was too wary to disregard Caroline's caution.

'I think I will drive across to Moredun House this afternoon,' she said after a little. 'I am positively expiring to tell the old creature the news. Will you come?'

'Yes, I'll come; but, mamma, I think you are really premature in speaking of Gertrude's engagement as if it were an accomplished fact. Were anything to prevent it, think how humiliated you would feel.'

'Nothing *shall* prevent it,' said Mrs. Mayne decidedly. 'Will you go and order the ponies while I run up and see what Gertrude is about?'

She found Gertrude sitting by the window of her dressing-room, looking idly out upon the peaceful landscape smiling under the sunshine of the spring. The mother noted the pale cheek, the listless air, but she did not see the look of weariness and pain which dimmed the lustrous eyes.

'My love, you have risen, I see. I am glad to see you exert yourself so much,' she said, with her usual fussy fondness. 'Caroline and I have been thinking of taking a little drive. You will not weary while we are gone? If you will we will gladly stay indoors for your sake.'

'Indeed no, mamma. Go by all means. I shall not weary,' said Gertrude, with almost feverish eagerness.

'Very well, love, we will be back in time for tea, at which I hope somebody else will join us,' she said slyly. Then, stooping to kiss her daughter's fair cheek, the giddy woman hurried away to dress.

Gertrude sat still in the window-sill. She saw the phaeton drive away; then she rose hurriedly and began to look out her

outdoor garb. She buttoned on her boots, put on her walking garb and a warm fur cape, and stole down-stairs and out of doors. She went round by the stables, let Lion off his chain, and the twain took the familiar path by the Running Burn to Rumford. It was a strange madness which possessed the girl, an uncontrollable yearning to look once more upon the face of John Strathearn. She indeed felt that if she could but uplift her eyes to meet his true, earnest gaze she could ask him to save her, to take her away, out of his love for her, from the web of destiny which seemed to be closing round her path. And meanwhile John himself, poor fellow, was striding to the town by the high road, with his hat drawn over his brows, and something like the bitterness of death in his soul. He seemed oblivious of what was passing around him; he was unconscious of several greetings which fell from the lips of passers-by to whom he was known. More than one wondered what was up with the young master of the Earn Mills. Just as he entered the upper end of the High Street, he encountered at a crossing where three ways met the figure of Margaret Dunsyre, who had been making a call in the neighbourhood, and was on her way home. A faint roseleaf bloom touched her fair cheek, and she came to him with outstretched hand.

'John, how are you? What are you doing here at this hour?' she said banteringly.

He took her hand and lifted his hat, but on his set lips there came no answering smile.

'How are you, Margaret?' he said quite gravely. 'Is David well?'

'Yes, David is well. Were you on your way to us? What has happened to you? You seem out of sorts.'

'Do I? The easiest-minded among us do get out of sorts at times,' said John, trying to speak lightly. 'No, thanks. I shall not go in to-day. Good afternoon.'

His manner was abrupt, hurried almost to rudeness, and Margaret drew herself up in a slightly offended manner. But John saw it not, saw nothing then except a slim drooping figure in dark brown walking dress coming up the street. Margaret saw it too, and at once entered the house and shut the door. At that moment she felt bitter exceedingly against Gertrude Mayne. Gertrude also had seen *them*, and a deadness

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had crept about her heart, a stony dimness in her eyes, which made her limbs tremble beneath her. Nevertheless she kept bravely on, until she was quite near to John, then she almost stood still. But he never slackened his pace, only gravely lifted his hat and passed on to the other side of the street. He did not see the look of wistful entreaty change to anguish in the sweet, truthful eyes, else perhaps this history had never been written. Just then a well-appointed dogcart was driven furiously into the High Street, and Gertrude, looking up, perceived that it held her father and Sir William. Both looked in the utmost astonishment at sight of Gertrude, and Sir William, drawing rein, at once jumped to the ground.

'My darling, what are you doing here? Is it you or your ghost?' he said, with anxious solicitude.

'Why, puss, I thought you were in bed,' said her father blankly.

'No, papa; I have been up all day. I thought I would like a walk into town,' said Gertrude faintly. 'But I am weaker than I thought.'

'Surely. They ought to have taken better care of you,' said Sir William gravely. 'Come, allow me; we will soon take you home.'

He lifted her in his arms and placed her in the front seat. Then her father stepped across to the back, and Sir William jumped up beside her, and turned the horse's head. John Strathearn, happening to look back ere he turned down the Watergate, saw all that, and ground his teeth in his bitter pain.

He strode on to the mill, took his letters from the bag, and went away home. That had been an anxious day for the old master of Redlands, and when John came striding down the avenue he saw his father walking up and down the terrace, evidently watching for him. Forgive him if he felt a little impatient of the sympathy he knew was waiting for him. The bitterest disappointment which can wring a man's heart was his to-day.

'Well, my son, is all well?' asked the old man, in accents of trembling eagerness.

'I made a mistake, father,' said John, knowing it best to tell it all at once. 'I was ass enough to fancy a woman could care

for me for myself. Miss Gertrude Mayne is to be married in a few weeks' time to Sir William Lundie. Fortunately I heard it before I committed myself, and so was spared that humiliation.'

He turned his head away, and then looked across the wide stretch of country to the low-lying roofs of Meadowflats. The lordly pile of Castle Lundie intervened, intercepting his view, even as its master had come between him and his heart's desire.

For a time a deep silence lay upon them both.

'My lad, my dear lad,' said the old man at length, 'your old father will never fail you.'

'I know that, dad, thank God!' said John, and he brought his eyes back to his father's face with affectionate gaze. 'Don't fret about me, father. I will be all right. Well, I am but where I was before.'

'That is the true spirit of the boy,' said old John Strathearn, with admiring fondness. 'He won't let a sorrow master him!'

'Nay, when I have so many blessings, it would ill become me to say there was no good in anything simply because I am denied one thing,' said John, with simple earnestness. 'Well, dad, *that* is over and done with. Let us never talk upon it again. Will you agree?'

'Surely,' said the old man, and they shook hands upon it, and the subject was mentioned no more between them for many a day.

But in spite of his brave, bright, earnest words, characteristic of the man to the heart's core, it would not be over and done with for John Strathearn for a long time to come. Ah no! love was no light thing for him, and it would be no light task for him to forget.

Meanwhile Sir William's dogcart had arrived at Meadowflats, and Gertrude ran up-stairs to be scolded by her mother, who had been in the utmost consternation over her absence. Gertrude heard her in silence, and, when she went away at length to dress for tea, the girl sat wearily down on the front of the bed, and let her head droop on her hand. She had got the one look she craved for indeed; not in vain had she gone to seek it. Caroline had spoken the truth. She had only

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been the plaything of an idle hour to John Strathearn ; he had won her heart by his earnest words and winning ways, even while his was given to another. Was that the way of all mankind, she wondered ? was there no truth or honour in the heart of any one of them ? The afternoon's experience had borne fruit of its kind. Her own happiness was lost ; she would try now to find her solace in doing her utmost for the happiness of others.

Perhaps after a time the unflinching performance of duty would bring her the reward of contentment. Thus she reasoned in her solitude, and then, as if inspired by this new impulse, she hurriedly rose and made her toilet for the drawing-room. She was careful about it to-day. The dainty lace collar and sleeves, the pretty silver jewellery, the silver clasp for her hair (birthday gifts from her Uncle George when she was at school), all were remembered. And when she was ready she went down-stairs. Her mother's tea-table was spread, but the urn was not yet in. Her father was in the drawing-room alone, and looked up anxiously at her entrance.

'My love, my dear child, you look more like yourself now. I was afraid when I saw you to-day in the town. What was it ailed you ?'

'I told you, papa,' answered Gertrude quietly. 'I am quite well now.'

There was a moment's silence, then Franklin-Mayne spoke again with added eagerness.

'My child, I hope it will be all right—that Sir William—that none of us are to be disappointed ?'

Gertrude did not at once reply, and he continued in the same hurried, eager way,—

'Gertrude, have pity on your poor old father. I will tell you what perhaps would be better left untold. I am Sir William's debtor to an extent I can never hope to repay. If you become his wife there need never be any talk of repayment between us. It will take away all my cares, my darling.'

The faint colour which had stolen unawares to Gertrude's cheek died away, and she grew white to the lips. Her marriage was to be a barter between man and man. She was to give her youth and beauty, herself, in exchange for wealth



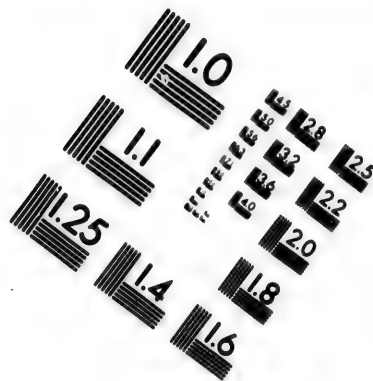
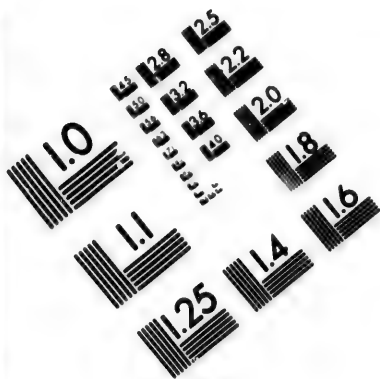
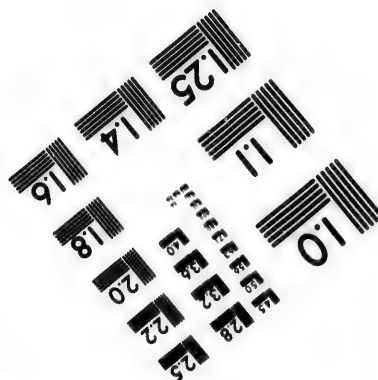
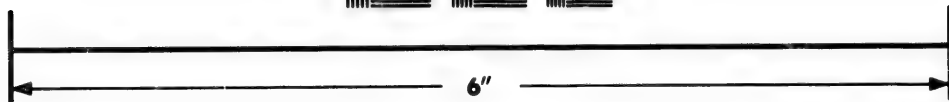
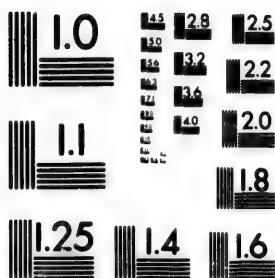


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and high estate. The thing was done often, she knew. Nearly every day the world is witness to such perversion of the laws of love and honour, but on that account it was none the less a heinous sin in her eyes. But for the sake of her poor, frail, failing father she would submit.

She went up to him and laid both her arms about his neck, and her voice when she spoke was broken by sobs.

'Put away all your cares, dear daddy. Out of my love for you I will do all you wish. For your dear sake I will be Sir William's wife, and God will help me to do my duty by him, and perhaps make it easier for me than I dare to hope at present.'

Sir William, who had been washing the dust of his drive from his hands and face, entered the room, and Gertrude started back. He came forward to the hearth, but the drooping head was not uplifted, the troubled, innocent eyes, wherein just then a deep shadow lay, did not meet his impassioned gaze.

Franklin-Mayne took his daughter's hand, and held it towards Sir William Lundie.

'There is my daughter, William Lundie,' he said solemnly. 'And may God deal with you as you deal with her.'

Then he hurriedly left the room.

Sir William raised the white hand he held to his lips, and took a step nearer to the slender figure.

'This is my darling then, my promised wife?' he said eagerly.

Gertrude was silent a moment, but she had put her hand to the plough, and dared not now turn back.

'I will be your wife, Sir William,' she said quite calmly, too calmly to satisfy a lover's heart. But he put his arm about her, and, bending his stately head, kissed her on the lips.



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CHAPTER XII.

LUNDIE HOUSE, PICCADILLY.

IN the spacious and beautiful drawing-room of Lundie House, Piccadilly, sat Miss Lundie alone on a sunny afternoon. She was doing nothing, sitting in one of the long, wide windows with her hands idly folded on her lap, and her eyes wandering alternately from the budding greenness in St. James's Park to the endless throng of carriages which rolled incessantly to and from the City. It was half-past four, and fashionable London was out of doors. Hyde Park was full; already there were many riders in the Row. Miss Lundie at present was denied her favourite exercise, because her brother was out of town, and she did not care to have a footman for an attendant. Her pale, aristocratic face wore no very pleasant expression that sunny April day, and yet there was enough of beauty and of promise in the fresh green turf on which pink-lipped daisies were already beginning to open their eyes—enough of suggestive loveliness on hedge and tree, and in the rose-tinted sky—to gild even the heaviest thought. Elizabeth Lundie, however, had no great love for nature's beauty; to her a well-furnished room, or a costly article of jewellery or fashionable attire, was infinitely more interesting than spring's green mantle, or than the rich hues of autumn. She was elegantly dressed in an afternoon gown of silk and finest cashmere, her ornaments quaint mosaic set in gold. She was not beautiful

by any means, but she was a handsome and elegant-looking woman, who carried her rank in her very mien. While she was sitting meditating upon her brother's absence in Scotland, and the cause thereof, one of the many stately equipages which can be counted by hundreds in the West End during the season, was drawn up at the door of Lundie House. Miss Lundie recognised the high-stepping roans pertaining to the Countess of Devanha, even before she saw the lovely face of her ladyship nodding and smiling from the carriage. In a few minutes Lady Devanha was ushered into the drawing-room of Lundie House. Miss Lundie came forward to meet her, and they gave each other the kiss of conventionality, and expressed their pleasure at meeting, for in Scotland they had become close companions.

'I was wearying for you, Sophia,' said Elizabeth Lundie. 'Do let me send your carriage home, and do you take off your bonnet and take tea with me. I am sufficiently dull here. Not a creature has looked near me since William went away.'

'My dear, I daren't. The Earl would be furious. We are to dine at six to-night to suit some gentlemen he has asked, and I *must* be home in time,' said Lady Devanha. 'But where is your brother? Why, he was riding in the Row the other day.'

'Last Wednesday, and left for Scotland by the night mail.'

'What does that mean? Had he a sudden call?'

'Not that I know of, but I can very well surmise what the object of his visit is,' said Miss Lundie, with bitterness. 'In fact, William is going to get himself a wife, Sophia.'

'And you will be deposed so soon!' exclaimed the Countess, sinking into a chair, and folding her dainty hands complacently on her knee. 'And, pray, who is the happy fair?'

'A nobody, Sophia; that is where it stings,' said Miss Lundie hotly. 'One could bear to have one's place usurped by a fit person. It is one of the Franklin-Maynes who has aspired to and has won my brother's affections,' she added, with immeasurable scorn.

'Impossible! I remember them well. The elder one is very handsome, and the other is a pretty little school-girl. Of course it is the former,' said Lady Devanha.

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'Oh, of course; and from what I have seen of her she will be likely to carry matters in a very high-handed fashion when she is Lady Lundie.'

'You are right. It will be impossible for you and she to live under one roof,' said Lady Devanha significantly. 'Well, well, I did not think your brother likely to settle so soon. It is extraordinary sometimes the freaks these men take.'

'Was William very gallant in India, Sophia?' queried Miss Lundie, with interest.

Lady Devanha shrugged her shoulders.

'My dear, he was a perfect lady-killer. Is it possible you have not heard the story of poor Adelaide Cruden?'

'How could I possibly hear it? Do tell me.'

'It is easily told; only, my love, it will not greatly redound to your brother's credit. Adelaide Cruden was a young subaltern's sister—orphans they were, who, out of pity, were somewhat taken notice of in our circle. She was one of those sweet, angelic, milk-and-water maidens whose chief aim in life seems to be to die of love for some man. Well, your brother made love to her, promised to marry her, and all that, you know, and she worshipped him. After a little her blind devotion began to pall upon our gay Lothario, and he grew less fond. Well, of course, she began to break her heart and her health over it, and they said she came and implored him to have pity on her. He promised to marry her in a given time, I believe, and the poor fond thing began to make her preparations. But when it came to be so serious, my lord was missing, gone up the country tiger-hunting, or something, and he wrote to her, saying it would be better for them never to meet again. What did she do? Died, of course, as was to be expected of her kind. The brother, a hot-headed young fellow,' added Lady Devanha, with a little smile, for she had held that same hot-headed fellow fast in her toils, 'vowed vengeance against Sir William, and would have had it, too, had he not been out of Calcutta when your brother returned. Public opinion was rather against William for a time, and I am right in suspecting that he found it far too hot for him, and so came home, apparently, to find pastures new.'

'Dear me, how interesting! but it was rather mean of

William to treat the poor thing so badly,' said Miss Lundie musingly. 'I don't suppose Miss Franklin-Mayne would be greatly pleased to hear such a story.'

'My dear, I can read my own sex like an open book, and I tell you she is not the sort of woman to let such trifles ruffle her,' said Lady Devanha. 'If her husband can provide her with position, means, and every other needful of this life, she will not let his antecedents or ante-matrimonial affairs trouble her. I think I could get on very well with your future sister-in-law.'

'Then you *will* make friends with her, Sophia?' said Miss Lundie rather reproachfully.

Lady Devanha laughed a silvery laugh.

'My love, of course I will. If I want to flirt sometimes with Lady Lundie's husband, I must be civil to Lady Lundie herself. I am very fond of your brother, Elizabeth, and when I want to tease the Earl, I tell him I would infinitely have preferred William Lundie for a husband, only he did not ask me in time,' she said, with charming candour, and then rose to go. 'Let me advise you, Elizabeth, not to look too glum over this affair; always put the best face on trouble. Of course I sympathize with you. It is infinitely preferable to be Miss Lundie of Castle Lundie and Lundie House than Miss Lundie of nowhere in particular; but such is life. Some day soon I hope you will have a home of your own, but, ah me! matrimonial prizes now-a-days are few and difficult to draw. Ah, here is your tea-tray! How I should like to stay and partake with you, but I must positively go. My love, good afternoon.'

So saying, the Countess fluttered away, to relate to the next friend she met the entire circumstances of the Lundie family, and to speak pityingly of 'that poor, plain Elizabeth,' at whom no man would ever look.

The evening mail brought a letter for Miss Lundie addressed in her brother's bold handwriting, and bearing the Rumford post-mark. It was very brief, merely stating that he would not return to town for a few days, and giving various directions about the horses and other uninteresting matters. So Miss Lundie had to abide in comparative solitude till the end of the week, when, on Saturday morning, she received a

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telegram saying her brother would be home at night. Now she had no expectation of being told what had taken him to Scotland; she was therefore rather surprised when, after having had his late dinner, he came up to the drawing-room, evidently for the purpose of having some conversation with her. He was in a very amiable mood—in fact, he even seemed to look younger; evidently his mission had been crowned with success.

‘Well, have you had a dull time of it during my absence, Elizabeth?’ he asked affably.

‘Not particularly,’ she answered briefly.

‘I have wondered whether you had any idea of what took me to Scotland,’ he said then.

‘How could I possibly have any idea, William? You do not make me your confidanté.’

‘Perhaps wisely. You have rather many dear particular friends to be trusted with much,’ he said, with good-humoured sarcasm. ‘Perhaps it may surprise you, then, to hear that I am about to be married?’

Miss Lundie preserved admirably her careless, indifferent expression of face.

‘Why should I be surprised?’ she asked quietly. ‘You are no longer young, and it is natural you should desire to give Castle Lundie a mistress, as your ancestors have done.’

‘Well said, Elizabeth! You are a thoroughly sensible woman. I admire your practical good sense!’ exclaimed Sir William delightedly, for he was in the best of spirits, and everything seemed to smile upon him now. ‘Have you guessed at the lady of my choice?’

A slight smile curved his sister’s proud lips.

‘Am I blind, William? Do you suppose I have watched you go day after day to Meadowflats without knowing *why* you went? There is no use for me to say that I think you might have found a woman whose name and rank could better match your own, but I am not fool enough to suppose that anything I, or any person, would say, could for a moment shake your decision or change your plan.’

‘You are right, Elizabeth, and I am grateful to you for the manner in which you have received this announcement, said Sir William slowly. ‘Believe me. I shall not forget it.’

There was a moment's silence, and Elizabeth Lundie sat with her eyes downcast, and a slightly heightened colour in her cheek. She had schooled herself for this, knowing that with a man of her brother's calibre it was the wisest and best course to pursue if she would keep her own interests in view.

'You will, of course, expect me to quit your house before Lady Lundie comes home?' she said, lifting her keen eyes questioningly to his face.

'That is a matter I wish to lay before you, Elizabeth. Miss Franklin-Mayne has very little experience of society—none whatever of the things which will be required of her as my wife,' said Sir William, beginning to pace to and fro the room. 'If you are willing, it would be good for her were you to remain, at least for a time, a member of our family circle.'

To say Elizabeth Lundie was astonished but weakly expresses her feelings.

'It is very kind of you to wish me to stay, William,' she said; 'but I fear it might not be agreeable to your wife. It did not strike me that she lacked experience. She has been out, I think, for a few years.'

Sir William smiled. He knew what mistake his sister was labouring under.

'I see your perception has been slightly at fault, Elizabeth. It is not *Miss* Franklin-Mayne who is my promised wife, but her younger sister, Gertrude.'

Miss Lundie rose.

'Why, William, is it possible? That school-girl! that child! that innocent, baby-faced little creature!' she exclaimed. 'Is it she you have chosen as the future Lady Lundie?'

'Even so. Gertrude Mayne is the future Lady Lundie!'

'I am relieved, but immeasurably surprised. Well may you say she lacks experience! Why, poor little timid thing, like Lady Burleigh, she will be borne down with an honour unto which she was not born,' exclaimed Miss Lundie. 'Well, William, I do not know where your eyes were when you chose her instead of her handsome sister; only you have this advantage, that you will be able to mould your girl-wife into what form you will.'

'Then you will stay with us for a time at least?' said Sir William a trifle drily, for he did not altogether relish his sister's plain speaking.

'Willingly. Did you speak of it to her?'

'It was not necessary. Gertrude is willing to be guided by me in all things.'

Miss Lundie smiled.

'I thought as much; but surely, William, your marriage will not take place before the lapse of a year at least.'

'Why not? it is already fixed for the 18th of June, then we will go upon the Continent, only returning in time for the Twelfth. You will go to Castle Lundie in our absence, Elizabeth, and be in readiness to receive us.'

Miss Lundie nodded. She was well pleased; nay, more, her heart swelled with pleasure and hope, for the future was very bright. She would be mistress still of Castle Lundie—her years, her experience, her rank, would make it easy for her to set aside her brother's girl-wife.

Not so hasty, Elizabeth Lundie; the girl-wife may prove herself a woman yet, with a strength of purpose and firmness of will with which even yours will find it difficult to cope.





CHAPTER XIII.

THE MARRIAGE.



FINE tit-bit for the Rumford busybodies was the forthcoming marriage of Sir William Lundie to Gertrude Franklin-Mayne. Opinion was divided as to the suitableness of the match, but people were unanimous in saying that Mrs. Franklin-Mayne had played her cards well. Happy woman! she was in the zenith of delight. Bills ceased to worry—ceased to come in at all, indeed, for, in the eyes of Rumford tradespeople, the future mother-in-law of the chief lord of the soil was a very different person from the wife of the needy master of Meadowflats. She could order what she pleased now without fear of the result, consequently Meadowflats was figuratively speaking for a time a land flowing with milk and honey. The bride-elect's trousseau was entrusted to Madame Dumaresque of Regent Street, and that lady came her august self to Meadowflats to see what was required. It was imperative that she should come, because the bride to be was not able to travel to London to see her. Gertrude's listlessness, her pale and wearied languor, was a source of some chagrin to Mrs. Mayne, and of an unspeakable uneasiness to her husband. Looking at the shadowed face of his best-loved child, the man's heart was smitten with remorse, and he could almost have stopped the thing had it been within his power to do so.

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But *that* was impossible now, even if Gertrude had seemed to wish it. She was passive, perfectly willing to do anything that was required of her,—to look at patterns and materials, at jewellery and milliner's trifles,—she would not fail in one jot or tittle of her task. She accepted the magnificent half-hoop of diamonds which Sir William brought as a formal token of their betrothal, allowed him to put it on her finger, and to kiss her, and murmur fond words about it and the plainer one so soon to glitter by its side. But she showed no elation over his costly gift, the glittering circlet awakened no tender chord in her heart, recalled none of those sweet memories inseparably connected with the engagement-ring when it is given and received in love. Although Sir William could have wished a little more animation in his darling, he still attributed it to shyness, and told himself the white bud would open when he had it in his own keeping, away from every prying eye. Miss Lundie did not come down to Scotland until the last week of May, but she had previously written a kind, if rather patronizing, letter to her future sister-in-law, and received a gently-worded and grateful reply. The first morning she was at Castle Lundie she drove over with her brother, as in duty bound, to see the bride. Caroline was alone in the drawing-room, and a somewhat distant greeting passed between these two women, who never would be friends, because their natures were antagonistic.

'I have come to see your sister, Miss Franklin-Mayne,' said Elizabeth Lundie. '*Can I see her?*'

'I suppose so,' said Caroline carelessly, and touched the bell. 'Pray tell Miss Gertrude that Sir William and Miss Lundie are here,' she said calmly, and resumed the delicate piece of fancy-work with which she had been engaged when the visitor was announced. She did not offer to speak, and the two sat in dreary silence, for Sir William had purposely remained out of doors with Mr. Mayne. In a few minutes Mrs. Mayne came bustling into the room, with outstretched hands and radiant face. Miss Lundie actually forgot herself so far as to stare at her attire. She wore a morning-gown of pompadour sateen of such a pattern as an acknowledged beauty would scarcely have dared to wear. Her cap was of the same material, profusely trimmed with lace and adorned with primroses.

'My dear Miss Lundie, so charmed to see you! so good of you to come so soon after your fatiguing journey,' she said. 'Yes, Gertrude will be down just in a minute. Poor, sweet child, she is nervous and a little fluttered. Not to be wondered at, I think, at her age, and the time drawing so near.'

Miss Lundie bowed stiffly, and resumed her seat. She did not know which was the more insufferable—the gushing, overdressed mother, or the proud, still, haughty sister. It was an unspeakable relief to her when Gertrude at last entered the room. She rose once more, advanced half-way to the door, and, taking both the girl's slim hands in hers, kissed her cheek.

'My dear, I am glad to see you; but how pale you look—how changed! I would scarcely have known you!' she said kindly.

The faintest shadow of a smile hovered for a moment on the girl's pale lips, and the truthful, earnest eyes were uplifted with strange wistfulness to the haughty face. Elizabeth Lundie never forgot that look. She went back to her chair, and Gertrude sat down on an ottoman, and folded her hands. The diamonds glittered on the slender third finger, the sunbeams making each precious gem a little blaze of light.

Mrs. Mayne talked, the rest sat silent. Again Miss Lundie was relieved by the entrance of the gentlemen. She keenly watched Gertrude for the next fifteen minutes, and several things made themselves singularly plain to her penetrating mind.

'When will you come over and see me, dear, before I resign my post to you?' she said gracefully, when she took Gertrude's hand at parting.

A deep, almost painful flush then overspread the girl's sweet face.

'Thanks, you are very good; but if you please I would rather remain at home. I have so little time with them now,' she said quietly.

'Your father has promised to bring you some day early in the week, Gertrude,' said Sir William; and, though his glance was fond, his tone was decided. 'It will be a great disappointment to Elizabeth if you do not come.'

'Very well,' said Gertrude, quite quietly still.

Then the farewell greetings were made, and the brother and sister rode away together.

'The child is very much changed since I saw her last,' said Miss Lundie, after they had left the entrance-gates of Meadowflats behind. 'What is the matter with her, William?'

'Matter with her?—nothing. What do you suppose is the matter with her?' said Sir William testily.

'She looks exceedingly ill, as if her mind and body alike were under some terrible strain,' said Miss Lundie slowly. 'It struck me—wrongly, I hope—that she had the appearance of a person being coerced into marriage.'

'Elizabeth, you talk most absurdly!' said Sir William hotly, for the idea was not pleasant to him. 'Who could coerce her into a marriage?'

'That mother is fit for anything. She is a frightful creature,' said Miss Lundie. 'I hope, William, that you will not encourage your mother-in-law to come often to Castle Lundie.'

'Not exactly,' said Sir William slowly. 'I am not marrying the family, Elizabeth. What do you think of her sister?'

'I do not like her. She will make trouble if you do not take care.'

Sir William smiled.

'I do not agree with you. I both like and respect Caroline Mayne. She shall be welcome to come and go as she pleases to Castle Lundie.'

Miss Lundie bit her lips, but made no further remarks upon Caroline.

'The old man looks very delicate, quite worn and aged,' she said next.

'Ay, poor old chap, he is not long for this world, I fear,' said Sir William.

Just then a horseman came in view on the dusty road, a noble animal bearing a stalwart figure, in grey tweeds. When he came up a distant salutation passed between Sir William and John Strathearn.

'How handsome young Strathearn is, and what a beautiful animal he rides!' exclaimed Miss Lundie when they were past.

'Ay, these young sprigs of the cotton aristocracy like to ape their betters,' said Sir William bitterly.

Causeless was his dislike of John Strathearn, but it was the outcome of jealous envy of the noble, youthful figure, of the fine face, of the love with which he was loved in Rumford; in fact, Sir William Lundie would very willingly have seen him crushed to the dust. Little minds only are capable of such poor jealousy. In John's nature there was no room for such, and he honestly wished his high-born and successful rival every happiness, if only he would be good to the sweet young wife *he* would have given so much to win.

Gertrude was not able to pay the promised visit to Castle Lundie early in the week; she was even unable to leave her own apartments. Caroline was with her constantly there, trying to cheer her by eloquent talk of the brilliant future in store. But the pathetic eyes never brightened—no expression of interest ever crossed the sweet, patient, shadowed face. When it came to within ten days of the marriage, which was to be celebrated quietly at Meadowflats, Mrs. Mayne took alarm in earnest, and sent for Doctor Dunsyre. When he saw her that afternoon he was inexpressibly shocked. She was so changed from the bright, happy, winsome girl who had so often spent an hour with his sister, that for a moment he could not speak. She smiled wanly up into his face, and asked kindly for Margaret.

'She is well, thank you; but, my dear Miss Gertrude, it pains me inexpressibly to see you so ill, and the auspicious event so near at hand,' he said gravely.

'My daughter has been much excited, and a little worried, perhaps, with the preparations,' said Mrs. Mayne a little sharply. 'Surely you can prescribe some tonic to strengthen and raise the system a little?'

Yes, Doctor Dunsyre could very well prescribe a tonic. He knew what would work the charm, but he dared not utter it.

'I will send up something this afternoon, Mrs. Mayne,' he said politely. 'And in the meantime, Miss Gertrude, I would advise you to go out of doors as much as possible. Has this lovely June weather no tempting charms for you?'

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the face of her old friend, caused Gertrude's eyes suddenly to overflow. Seeing that, Mrs. Mayne hurried him away, inwardly anathematizing him for what she termed his meddling interference. Yet there had been nothing meddling or interfering in David Dunsyre's words, though his manner implied much. In some things Mrs. Mayne was shrewd and far-seeing enough.

On the terrace outside he met Caroline face to face. Oh, how lovely she looked in her white summer dress, how desirable in his eyes. He saw that she would have spoken, also that her face visibly paled, but he only gravely lifted his hat, and, jumping into his gig, drove rapidly away. David Dunsyre did not mention to his sister that day that he had been at Meadowflats. He was a little odd in some things, and could keep his own counsel better than any man in Rumford. The first time he mentioned his visit was one afternoon when John had dropped in to the drawing-room, and Margaret made some remark upon the wedding to take place in two days' time.

'It strikes me very forcibly that the poor girl is being forced into this marriage,' he said slowly, as he sipped his tea.

'You have no right to say so, David,' spoke up Margaret sharply. 'I assume Gertrude Mayne is not the sort of woman to be coerced into anything.'

'Um, that's just a piece of opinion,' said David; and though he kept his eyes keenly on John's face he saw no sign of interest or emotion there, only it *did* strike him that of late his friend had seemed to look dull, and more careworn than he should.

'When did you form that opinion?' asked Margaret.

'I went to see her professionally a week ago, and the change in her was striking and painful,' he said slowly, still looking at John. He saw his face change, and that he swiftly turned away his head.

'It will be the burden of her honours, perhaps, weighing upon her, like poor Lord Burleigh's wife,' said Margaret, with mild sarcasm, using unconsciously Miss Lundie's own words.

Neither David nor John liked the tone in which she spoke.

'It is a question worth studying, why you are so universally uncharitable towards each other,' said the Doctor drily. 'Must

you go, John? If you wait till I run up to see a patient in the Terrace, I'll convoy you a bit.'

'I can't wait; thanks all the same,' said John, and somewhat abruptly took his leave.

David's words rang their changes in his ears. Could they have a grain of truth in them? could it be that among them they were breaking his darling's heart, spoiling the fair young life at its very outset?

Unconscious of what he was doing, he strode on past the mill, along the burn road to the bridge—ay, across it too, and up the path to the Meadowflats grounds. And once at the stile, which was hidden from view of the town by the leafy June foliage, he caught the flutter of a white shawl, the gleam of sunny hair, and his heart beat fast and furious in his breast. A few strides took him to the stile, and he was face to face once more with his love. He could have cried out at the woful change upon that lovely face, but both stood absolutely still, Gertrude trembling from head to foot, until she was obliged to lay one blue-veined hand upon the mossy rail for support.

'I am mad, idiotic to come here!' said John hoarsely. 'I know not what impulse moved me to come. I heard them say you were being forced to marry Sir William Lundie, and I suppose I came to see. Only let me hear from your own lips that they lied; tell me you are happy, and I will go away, praying God bless you and him.'

No words fell from the white lips of Gertrude Mayne. Her wide eyes looked straight into his with a strange commingling in their depths. Agony, wistful entreaty, yearning love were there, but he could not read them rightly.

'I am to be married the day after to-morrow,' she said at length, in a faint whisper. 'Why did you wait so long?'

A strange light came into John's eyes, the light of a passion held in curb.

'If you will but bid me, my darling, I will take you from them yet. It is not too late,' he said hoarsely, and took a step nearer to her.

There was the crackling of brushwood behind Gertrude, a hasty footfall, and then the shadow of a tall figure fell aslant the sunlight of the summer evening. A voice fell upon their

ears, cold, measured, clear and distinct as a bell in the drowsy stillness.

'I have been looking for you, Gertrude, scarcely dreaming that I should find you here with this person,' he said, without so much as looking at John. 'Pray allow me to take you back. I fear you are weaker than I thought.'

John ground his teeth when he saw her turn to him and obediently lay her hand on his arm. They had trained her well.

'I am very sorry, Sir William, it was quite by accident,' she said calmly. Then, as she turned to go, she looked at John, and if her voice took a more hurried tone that was all. 'Good-bye, Mr. Strathearn; pray forget what I said. I thank you for your good wishes. Good-bye.'

So they passed away together from his view, and he saw Gertrude *Mayne* no more. When next he looked upon her face she was Lady Lundie, of Castle Lundie, Lundie House, Piccadilly, and Stoke Abbey, Herts; for by all these titles did Mrs. Mayne love to call her.

On the third day after that, the following notice appeared in the English and Scotch newspapers:—

'At Meadowflats, Rumford, N.B., on the 18th inst., Sir William Lundie, Bart., of Castle Lundie and Stoke Abbey, to Gertrude Lucy Mary, second daughter of Gilbert Franklin-Mayne, Esq.'





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PART II.

CHAPTER I.

HUSBAND AND WIFE.

IN the wide, low window of a private drawing-room in a Venetian hotel stood Lady Lundie on the afternoon of the eighteenth of July. She was alone and idle, and apparently deeply absorbed in thought. Her eyes were fixed on the spires and domes of that wondrous city, but her heart was elsewhere. Venetian skies were blue and smiling, Venetian scenery picturesque and novel to her unaccustomed vision ; nevertheless her eyes were filled with deep yearning for the greyer skies and colder, more rugged beauty of the land of her birth. Her attitude was listless, suggestive of languor, and a little weariness of the heart—not an attitude common to a four weeks' bride. Her face was pale, and her eyes mournfully shadowed ; but her figure seemed to have gained in dignity and grace. The slight, insignificant-looking girl, who a month ago had taken the vows of wifehood upon her in the drawing-room at Meadowflats, was a girl no longer, but a woman who knew her position, and who carried in her mien the consciousness of her double dignity of rank and wifehood. Gertrude Mayne was a being of the past, whose life was over. Gertrude Lady Lundie's career was but newly begun.

A peal of merry laughter broke the stillness of the summer air, and Lady Lundie, seeing whence it came, smiled slightly and waved her hand. A gondola, in which sat a sweet English girl with a young man beside her, swept swiftly up the water past the windows of the hotel. They were visitors to Venice, and betrothed lovers as well. Lady Lundie had met them at various places to which her husband had taken her, and had grown quite interested in them; they were so young and light-hearted, and so happy in each other. The girl was travelling with her father; the young man had a college chum as his companion; but the latter, finding himself so often *de trop*, had settled down for a week's art study at Florence, and left the lover to follow his betrothed to Venice. The girl was a year or two older than Lady Lundie, yet the interest the young wife took in her was that which an elderly woman, who had suffered much, might take in one who was just standing on the threshold of life. Lady Lundie herself was an object of intense and compassionate interest to that pair of happy lovers. Her position was plain enough—she carried her history in her face. Sir William Lundie would have felt righteously indignant had he overheard the terms in which he was discussed by the boy and girl, as he contemptuously called them.

When the gondola swept out of sight, Lady Lundie turned away to a little work-table and took up the slipper she was sewing for her father. She had finished the other at Rome, and this one had been begun in Florence. It would interest him, she knew, to be told where every stitch had been put in. Before she had taken the work in her hand, however, the door opened, and her husband entered the room.

'Busy again, Gertrude?' he said; 'you are, without doubt, the most diligent of womenkind.'

'Indeed, no, William; I have been looking out of the window for at least half an hour, and was rewarded at last by the sight of our young lovers. They seem to be our travelling companions.'

'Apparently. Well, what am I to get for what I have brought you?' he asked teasingly.

She looked up eagerly.

'Letters, William! Scotch letters! Let me see them! she cried. 'It seems so long since I heard of or from home.'

'There is but one letter to-day, my love, for which I want my payment,' he said, keeping his hand behind him, and slightly bending towards her.

Her face flushed, but she raised her head, touched his brow with her lips, and held out her hand.

'Let me have it now, if you please.'

'There it is ; I believe you prize it more than you would one of mine,' he said, in a slightly vexed tone. 'The writing, I think, is your sister's.'

Gertrude did not hear ; she had broken the seal, and had begun its perusal. It was short, yet ominous enough.

'MEADOWFLATS, N.B.

'July 10th, 18—.

'MY DEAR GERTRUDE,—I write this in the hope that it will speedily reach you. You know papa was ailing when you left, and whether it was the excitement of the marriage or not we cannot tell, but he has been very poorly ever since. He has not been down-stairs, nor out of bed, indeed, for a week. Doctor Dunsyre shakes his head. Mamma telegraphed for Doctor Charteris this morning, and he wires from Northumberland, where he is attending the Marchioness of Barnsley, that he will be here to-night. Papa speaks very much of you, and in his sensible moments, which, I am sorry to say, are growing fewer every hour, he always asks if you are on your way home. I think, dear, you ought to come, for, though we still hope for recovery (Doctor Dunsyre says he has a chance if the illness takes a certain turn), we must be prepared for the worst. I know this will be a terrible shock to you, my dearest, but we dare not keep it from you. Do try to come. Surely Sir William will not hinder or delay. With dear love to you, and kind remembrances to Sir William, I am your loving sister,

'CAROLINE MAYNE.'

The letter fluttered to the floor, and Lady Lundie covered her face with her hands. Sir William picked it up and read it through. He never thought of asking permission to do so, although his letters were not left open for his wife's perusal. He had his own opinions on certain matters.

'This is unfortunate, Gertrude,' he said, and neither voice nor expression were particularly sympathetic.

'I will go and tell Clare to pack my things. I suppose we can get away from Venice to-night?' said Lady Lundie, starting up.

'No, we cannot, nor can we act so hurriedly,' said Sir William quietly. 'We must consider certain things. This will upset all our arrangements.'

'What of that? What are arrangements to me when papa is ill, dying, perhaps calling for me, and I not there?' she exclaimed passionately.

'Be calm, my love, or you will make yourself ill, and then travelling will be out of the question. Have you considered? Why, we are not expected home for three weeks. Castle Lundie will not be in readiness till then, Elizabeth not there to receive us; in fact, it is well-nigh impossible for us to return to Scotland immediately,' said Sir William, who was methodical in his habits, and hated to be hurried or inconvenienced in any way.

His wife looked him straight in the face, with wondering, almost scornful eyes.

'What do you say, William? Is it possible you would keep me here when my heart is breaking to be home, and yet you speak of love for me?'

'Be reasonable, my life, and remember your first duty now is to me,' said Sir William, for if he did not hold his own in this, their first difference, his authority would be gone. 'Of course, I am extremely grieved for you and for your poor father,—who is a most estimable man,—and I have no intention of keeping you away from him at this time; only there are some things which, as I said, must be considered and planned before we can at a moment's notice upset all our arrangements.'

Lady Lundie was very pale, and in her eyes there was a strange commingling of feelings.

'Very well, William, I will try to be patient, and wait till you are ready to take me home,' she said, in a low voice, and turned to leave the room.

But her husband's heart smote him, and he caught her to his breast.

'My darling, of course you think me a tyrant. It is my

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love for you which makes me so. I am jealous of your father, jealous of everything I fear you estimate more highly than me,' he said passionately. 'Of course I will take you home. We will leave to-morrow, and travel by way of Paris. It will take us a little longer, but I have some business there to which I must attend. Look up, and smile upon me, and say you forgive me for my seeming harshness.'

She did as she was bid, but he knew that her heart was not in her action nor in her words. He was beginning to realize that it might be a mistake to marry a girl-wife who did not love him, even when he had her training in his own hands.

'I will go out, Gertrude, and telegraph to Elizabeth to proceed at once to Castle Lundie,' he said presently. 'She is staying at present with Lady Devanha at their place in Surrey.'

Gertrude turned her head quickly.

'There is no need to inconvenience Miss Lundie, William, as I shall probably be at Meadowflats for a time—that is, if papa is still in need of me,' she said, with a falter in her voice. 'There is no need of any formal reception.'

'My love, I must just remind you again that your home henceforth will be at Castle Lundie, not at Meadowflats,' said Sir William, in his quiet but decided tones. 'I shall not prevent you going to see your father, of course, but he will not expect that you are to take up your position as his nurse.'

Lady Lundie bit her lip. For the first time in her life the gentle spirit was roused, and something like anger was in her heart, and could have found expression through her lips. Her husband noted that quivering lip—noted, too, the heightened colour in her cheeks—and a smile touched for a moment his long, thin lips. The girl-wife, like other women, had a temper of her own.

'Shall I telegraph to your sister at the same time, and say we are on our way home?' he asked, as she again turned to leave the room.

'As you please,' she answered wearily, and went away up to her dressing-room. She sat down there, and, pressing her hands to her throbbing temples, tried to see wherein the path of duty lay. Because she had become a wife, was it her stern duty to renounce all other claims? must no other love find an abiding-place in her heart? If so, then she must be desolate

indeed, for, though she had been Sir William's wife for four weeks, she felt no nearer to him—nay, her heart was further off than ever. For at times there had been revealed to her a glimpse of selfishness, of heartlessness, which made her dismayed. Apart from any love, it would be no easy task for her to honour and respect the man with whom her life must henceforth be spent.

The maid, a gentle-eyed, kindly-disposed young creature, at that moment entered the room to lay out her lady's dinner toilet. She started to see her sitting in what appeared to be the abandonment of grief. With more delicacy than those of her class generally display, she was about to retire again, when her mistress raised her head.

'Come in, Clare,' she said feebly. 'I have had bad news from home, and it is quite possible we may have to return to Scotland earlier than we expected. You had better have everything in readiness in case of a sudden journey.'

'Very well, my lady. I am very sorry to hear it,' said the girl. 'What shall I put out for you to wear to-night?'

'Nothing—that is, anything you please,' said the young wife listlessly, for Sir William required that she should make an elaborate toilet for dinner every evening, even though they were alone.

Clare turned to the wardrobe with a perceptible sigh. That a lady, newly married, and possessed of so complete and beautiful a wardrobe, should be utterly indifferent as to what she should wear, betokened something seriously wrong. But it had not taken that sharp-eyed young person four weeks to discover that her fair young mistress was not a happy woman.

By ten o'clock next morning Sir William and Lady Lundie were on their way to Paris. She was not made aware of the nature of her husband's business there, but it detained them for two days; consequently they did not reach London until six days after the receipt of Caroline's letter. Lady Lundie preserved an outward semblance of calmness and patience; but oh, what an agony of longing, of bitter rebellion, surged in her storm-tossed soul! In those brief weeks she had learned that her husband required unquestioning obedience at her hands, and, though she had been early trained to obey in all things, it seemed harder now. She could not tell why it

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was that the desire was constantly with her to oppose her husband's will, why she should find it so hard a task to give him wifely duty. The solution of the mystery was that love was lacking to make obedience sweet. They left London on Thursday by the night mail, which arrived in Edinburgh early on the following morning. In the same leisurely manner Sir William set aside his wife's entreaty to take the train about to start for the south. He said it would be too much fatigue for her, and that they would drive to an hotel, where she would breakfast and rest awhile. The noon-day train would do very well; an hour or two now would make no difference. Again Lady Lundie heard and obeyed in absolute silence. All he did was apparently in solicitude for her, lest she should be over-fatigued or hurried in any way, but it awakened no gratitude in her heart.

The train left at a quarter to one, reaching Rumford at twenty minutes past two. A carriage from Castle Lundie awaited them, and when Lady Lundie heard her husband give the order to drive straight home she stood back.

'I will *not* go to Castle Lundie first, William,' she said, in low but resolute tones. 'You have tried me far enough, and if you do not choose to drive me I shall walk home.'

A dark red flush mounted slowly to Sir William's brow.

'To Meadowflats first, Masson,' he said, and handed his wife into the carriage.

She sank back among the cushions, and for a long time there was nothing said. But when the carriage reached the Meadowflats entrance she sat up and laid her hand almost pleadingly on her husband's arm. If she had done wrong she would be the first to ask to be forgiven.

'William,' she said, and her voice trembled, 'forgive me, but I could *not* wait any longer. My mind has been on the rack so long that I forgot myself, perhaps, and spoke as I should not have spoken. It was my anxiety about papa that made me do it.'

'You are on your way *home* now,' he said coldly, emphasizing the word, 'and can afford to dispense with my attention, perhaps with my presence. It is pleasant to be shown thus early in what estimation you hold me, Lady Lundie.'

She sank back among the cushions once more. Her lips

were sealed. For of what use was it to answer such unjust accusations? of what avail just then to seek to justify herself in his eyes?

The carriage swept round the bend in the avenue, and she quickly raised her head. Every blind was drawn, and there seemed to be a strange desolation lying upon her old home.

Without waiting to be helped she hastily alighted, and ran up to the door. The maid who opened it had eyes red with weeping, and at sight of Lady Lundie her tears flowed afresh.

'My father, Mary?' fell faintly from Gertrude's lips.

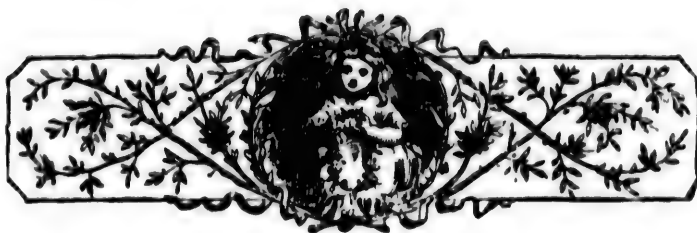
'Gone, Miss Gertrude,—Lady Lundie, begging your pardon,—this morning at half-past eleven, and looked for you to the end.'

Lady Lundie turned and looked towards her husband, who had followed her to the door.

'You hear, William?' she said, in a strange, quiet voice. 'We are too late. Perhaps you will be satisfied now?'



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CHAPTER II.

CASTLE LUNDIE.



LADY LUNDIE slowly went up-stairs. Caroline met her on the drawing-room landing, and put her arms about her. But no word passed between them till they entered the drawing-room and shut the door.

Then Caroline, pale and heavy-eyed with grief and watching, but lovely still, looked with mournful, questioning eyes into her sister's face. Then suddenly she burst into tears. Surely the heart of the haughty Caroline had undergone of late some wonderful change.

Gertrude looked on with tearless eyes and composed demeanour. She even wondered to see Caroline weep.

'Oh, Gertrude, why did you not make haste to come?' exclaimed Caroline at length. 'It broke our hearts to hear him calling so continually for you.'

'Why did I not make haste?' repeated Lady Lundie, and a strange, bitter smile touched her lips. 'I have a master now, Caroline, whose bidding I have to do.'

Caroline impatiently shook her head.

'My dear, what is it that has come to you? You look so old, so changed. I would not have known you.'

'It is the burden of my new estate weighing upon me,' said Gertrude. 'Tell me something about papa before I go to see him. Let me hear how he died.'

'There is little to tell,' replied Caroline. 'After I wrote he gradually sank. Dr. Charteris could do nothing for him. He said the system had been breaking up for months. He did not suffer very much—only great weakness—and his end was quite painless—just a falling asleep. His whole talk was of you, Gertrude. How he must have loved you! I think your marriage was a blow to him in one way. He appeared to regret it.'

Lady Lundie moved over to the window, and stood there a few minutes in silence. But though her eyes roamed over the sunny landscape, they saw none of it.

'Mamma is prostrated, and has gone to lie down; perhaps I had better awake her. She will be vexed if you go without seeing her.'

'No, Caroline, let her sleep. I could not see her yet. May God forgive me if I have any unfilial feelings towards my mother,' said Gertrude, and, turning away from the window, she came near to Caroline, and laid her hand on her arm.

'Caroline, the sacrifice, as you know, was made for papa, for him alone, and he is gone. I suppose now my home is yonder,' she said, pointing backward in the direction of Castle Lundie. 'Tell me, how is my life to be lived? Who is there on earth to help me now?'

'My darling, do not speak so wildly. You are over-excited and fatigued,' said Caroline. 'Come, let me take you up-stairs. One look at papa's face will calm you, I am sure. He looks so happy; but death had no terrors for him. It meant rest.'

Caroline was wise. She knew what was most needed. At the door of the room where the quiet sleeper lay, she drew back.

'I will come to you, dear sister, in a little while,' she whispered, and stole away.

Lady Lundie entered the room and shut the door. She walked to the window first and drew up the blind a little way. Then she went to the bed. It was indeed as Caroline had said. That beautiful and tranquil face was like a draught of sweet peace to the girl's weary heart. She knelt down and laid her head down on the pillow, her breath coming in quick sobs. At last the flood-gates were opened, and her eyes overflowed. It was Heaven's own healing, and took away some-

thing of the bitter load oppressing mind and heart. She grew calmer at length, rose to her feet, and stood looking down upon that dear face so soon to be removed from her sight for ever. She had strength now to look her position in the face. She had married for her father's sake, solely that his care might be lessened, that life might be made easier and pleasanter for him. And before he could reap the benefit of her sacrifice, before she could even bid him welcome to her own home, he was taken away. Oh, what meaning had an inscrutable Providence for this strange, hard dealing with her? She could find no wherefore for her trial, nor reason why she, of all others, should be singled out to drink such a bitter cup. Gradually something of the peace which dwelt upon the face of the dead stole into her heart. She would ask no more, question no further her strange destiny. She would take up her cross, as many another had to do in this weary world, and bear it with patience, until God in His mercy should bid her lay it down for ever. She had heard or read that the heroic performance of duty, the unflinching and uncomplaining endurance of things hard to bear, brought through time a placid satisfaction to the heart of the sufferer. In time, therefore, that solace would be hers. She bent down and kissed with lingering lips the sleeper's tranquil brow.

'Farewell, my father; some day, please God, we shall meet again!' she whispered, and stole back to the window to draw down the blind once more.

A low tap at the door, then its soft opening, made her turn her head.

'May I come in, dear?' said Caroline's voice. 'Sir William is waiting for you. He sent me to see if you were nearly ready.'

The summons, which an hour ago would have made her chafe, did not disturb her now.

'I am coming, Caroline,' she said, and when she came to the door she suddenly put her arms about her sister, and held her very close. 'You will come sometimes and see me yonder?' she said hungrily. 'I—I—shall want your love.'

'Yes, my pet, I will come,' said Caroline hurriedly, for she was nearly breaking down again. 'Before you go, won't you leave a message for mamma? She will wonder otherwise.'

'I have none,' answered Gertrude hastily. 'But there, that is not as *he* would have had me speak. Give mamma my love, and say I hope she is bearing up, and tell her from me that his is great gain.'

Ay, great gain indeed! Franklin-Mayne's younger child whispered the words over and over to herself as she went down-stairs—whispered them hungrily, yearningly, as if she would fain be partaker with him of that inheritance. Not yet awhile.

The husband and wife drove home in silence. The carriage had been closed at Meadowflats, but it was sufficiently light to permit Sir William to read his newspaper, but his wife sat far back in her corner with her eyes closed. There was a brief pause at the massive gateway which gave entrance to the grounds of the Castle, but the lodge-keeper was disappointed in not seeing the face of the new Lady Lundie. The approach was a mile in length, and wound most beautifully through stately elm trees renowned for their beauty and symmetry even in that richly-wooded district. Lady Lundie saw none of them, and, when the carriage stopped, she sat up with a slight start.

'Are we at Castle Lundie already, William?' she asked.

'Yes, Gertrude, this is Castle Lundie,' he said; and as the carriage door was opened he sprang out and assisted her to alight. When she stepped out upon the gravelled walk, and looked about her, a look of wonder came upon her face.

This was her first sight of Castle Lundie, although its grey turrets were visible from the eminence upon which Meadowflats was built. It was a grand old place, such as she had read of in song and story. The massive battlements, the mullioned windows, the pillared doorway with its couchant lions guarding either side, seemed redolent of the romance and associations of a long-gone age. There was ivy clinging here and there, in odd nooks and corners, its lovely green softening the stern outline, and adding a tender beauty exquisitely in keeping with the rest. Save for the wide sweep in front, it was shut in by its ancestral trees, beneath which the grass was green with all the freshness of the summer-time. The hum of drowsy insects filled the pleasant air, the birds chirped on the leafy boughs, the gentle summer zephyr whispered

shyly through the leaves, the sunbeams fell aslant the daisied turf. It was a picture of exquisite and restful beauty, which Lady Lundie beheld not unmoved.

'Oh, William, how beautiful!' she exclaimed involuntarily. 'I never thought Castle Lundie would be like this!'

'I am glad you are pleased with your home,' he said, with more kindness of manner. 'Come, we will go in. Kirkby tells me Elizabeth came two days ago. I am glad she is here to receive you.'

'It should not require another to welcome me to Castle Lundie when you are with me, William,' she said, somewhat timidly.

'Thank you, my love. Now you speak like your sweet self,' he said, and the last vestige of sternness disappeared from his brow. She took his proffered arm, and they entered the house together. In the inner hall stood Miss Lundie, ready to welcome them. Sir William stooped and kissed his sister, and then she turned to Gertrude.

'Lady Lundie, you are welcome home,' she said kindly, if rather condescendingly. Gertrude's face flushed slightly as she returned the proffered kiss.

'Call me Gertrude, if you please,' she said gently. Then, in obedience to her husband's whispered request, she turned towards the assembled domestics, to whom he introduced her in a brief word. She did not speak, but she smiled and bowed her head with sweet frankness to each one as she passed. That smile, and the nameless something which made her so loveable, won their hearts, and in the servants' hall there was nothing but kindly criticism of Sir William's wife, the new mistress of Castle Lundie.

'Your maid arrived some time ago, and told me you had gone to Meadowflats,' said Miss Lundie, as she accompanied her sister-in-law up-stairs. 'I hope you found your father somewhat improved?'

'We were too late,' answered Gertrude quietly. 'He died this morning at half-past eleven.'

Elizabeth Lundie noticed the heaving of the breast, the compressed lips, and the shadowing eyes, telling of emotion held in curb. She was somewhat amazed to see her young sister-in-law completely mistress of herself.

'I am exceedingly sorry,' she said, sincerely enough. 'It will sadden your home-coming. It was a pity after all that you shortened your trip on that account.'

'Perhaps; but it gets to be a weariness travelling about, Miss Lundie. I am not sorry to be at home. Are these my rooms? They are very beautiful,' she said, with quiet appreciation. 'Ah, I am glad they are at this side, because I can see Meadowflats from my windows.'

'That is a mere chance, I assure you,' Miss Lundie hastened to explain. 'These have always been Lady Lundie's rooms. They were my mother's and my grandmother's also. They required no alteration nor renewing, only my brother had a new piano sent down for your sitting-room. It is on the other side of the dressing-room. See, they are a complete suite in themselves, and can be shut off from the rest of the house. There is even a stair from the sitting-room which leads down to the western lobby, and a door there which opens out upon the terrace; but it has been unused for many years.'

'How quaint and delightful! I shall have that door reopened. It would be so nice to run down of a morning for a breath of fresh air without disturbing the rest of the house. Yes, I shall ask William to get that done for me at once.'

Miss Lundie bit her lip. The gentle, insignificant girl she had fancied would be so easily set aside, evidently knew her position very well, and intended to take advantage of it. There was nothing of timidity or hesitation in her manner. She spoke with the independence and fearlessness befitting the mistress of Castle Lundie. But it galled Elizabeth Lundie inexpressibly, because there came to her a whisper that her reign was ended.

'Tea is served in the drawing-room at five o'clock, Lady Lundie,' she said somewhat abruptly. 'But perhaps you are too fatigued to come down? If you would like to lie down for an hour instead, I can serve you up a cup here.'

'Thanks; you are very good. I shall be much obliged; but you need not trouble, I can send Clare for it. The sooner she makes her acquaintance with the house the better.'

Again Elizabeth bit her lip. There was nothing forward nor presuming in the demeanour of her brother's wife, only a

gentle and decided dignity, which would not be imposed upon or set aside. Elizabeth resented it bitterly; and yet could not Lady Lundie give what orders she pleased in her own house?

Gertrude noticed the slight frown on her sister-in-law's face, but misunderstood its meaning.

'Have I vexed you? I am quite willing to come down if you would rather I did,' she said quickly. 'I do not want to be troublesome, and, of course, you must know the household ways best.'

'It is no trouble whatever. You are at liberty to give what orders you please in the house, of course, Lady Lundie,' she said somewhat coldly. 'It is I who must guard against being troublesome now.'

Gertrude's face flushed. It was scarcely in good taste, she thought, to remind her of their reversed positions in the very hour of her home-coming.

'Do not be vexed with me, Elizabeth,' she said gently. 'I am the stranger, you know; and it is you who must make me feel at home.'

'I will do my best for you, Gertrude,' said Miss Lundie less coldly, and left the room.

She met Clare in the corridor, carrying a small tray whereon stood a tiny teapot and cup and saucer. Evidently this young person required no introduction to the house, nor any instructions regarding her duties. She would make the comfort of her mistress her first study, come what might. Miss Lundie passed her with darkening brow, and Clare went serenely on her way, inwardly hoping that haughty and cross-looking lady would not long remain an inmate of Castle Lundie.

'Why, Clare, you have been very smart,' said her mistress pleasantly. 'How have you managed to get all this before you have been an hour in the house?'

'I just went down, my lady, and said to the housekeeper you would need a cup of tea when you came, and she was very kind and pleasant, though Miss Lundie's maid turned up her nose at me for being officious.'

'Hush, hush, Clare! I cannot allow you to speak like that,' said Lady Lundie, with some sharpness. 'In your solicitude for my comfort, my girl, you must not disregard

that of others. But then it was very kind of you to make such haste on my account,' she added, seeing the girl's pretty face grow downcast in a moment under her reproof. 'Now, get my things unpacked. I fancy you will find room and to spare for them in the dressing-room.'

When she had drunk the tea Lady Lundie threw on a dressing-gown, wrapped a rug about her, and lay down on a couch in the sitting-room.

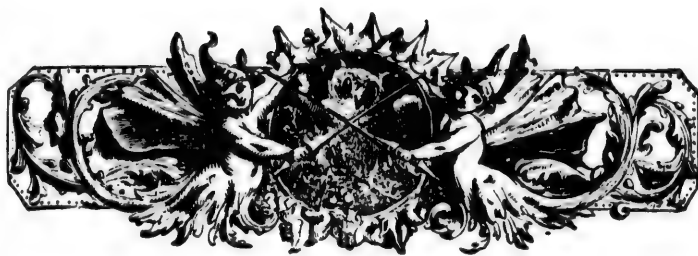
Clare moved about noiselessly in the adjoining apartment, and was much gratified at length to see her young mistress fall asleep. She sorely needed it, for her anxiety about her father had banished sleep, and now the reaction had come.

Meanwhile Miss Lundie, sitting alone in the drawing-room, was pondering the state of affairs in her mind. Her dreams were not all to be fulfilled; her shrewd vision foresaw that henceforth she would be a secondary person in Castle Lundie. What she had to decide now was whether, such being the case, it would be worth her while to remain.

That question was still unanswered when the butler brought in the tea-tray, and was followed almost immediately by Sir William himself.



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CHAPTER III.

THE PATH OF DUTY.

YOUR wife has gone to lie down for an hour William,' said Miss Lundie.

'I know. I looked into the sitting-room and found her sound asleep. Poor child, she is quite worn out!'

He spoke softly, even tenderly, and there was an expression on his face his sister had never seen there before. Up leaped her quick jealousy of the gentle creature who had touched that hard heart, and again the heightened colour and compressed lips betrayed inward annoyance.

This spirit of jealousy, of narrow selfishness, had in times gone wrought much misery in Castle Lundie, and would again. It was the family failing, and had found an abiding-place in the hearts of the brother and sister. The younger sister alone was free from any taint of it, having inherited her mother's beautiful and unselfish nature.

'Shall I give you some tea, William?' she asked.

'I don't mind. Gertrude ought to have had some before she lay down. She will taste no stronger stimulant.'

Miss Lundie laughed.

'Do not be afraid, William. Your wife will lack nothing for her own comfort, and she has trained her maid well. Lady Lundie knows her position, and will keep it.'

Sir William smiled slightly. His sister's evident disappointment rather amused him.

'That seems rather an unpleasant thought for you, Elizabeth,' he said.

'Why should it be?' she asked sharply. 'Only you are mistaken a little in your estimate of her. She is not one who will take an advice from me, or from you.'

'Do you think so? I have found her very docile. But women can never agree,' said Sir William indifferently. 'Well, what have you been making of yourself during our absence? How did you enjoy living *en famille* with Devanha and the lovely Sophia?'

'Very much. Poor Devanha! he is too soft and good-natured. Sophia takes shameful advantage of his indulgence. Hers was a clear case of *mariage de convenance*.'

'I suppose so. That sort of thing predominates now-a-days. Did you see anything of Eleanor? Is she better?'

'Not completely; Wilfred was talking of taking her off to Spain. They are too absurdly fond of each other. I prefer Sophia and Eric's mode of life. I always feel *de trop* at Leybourne Park.'

Sir William remained silent. Very seldom indeed did he visit his sister in her own house. The reason was not far to seek. There was nothing in common between the noble, high-souled young Earl, who had never done a dishonourable action in his life, and his middle-aged brother-in-law, whose life could not be laid bare for every eye to read.

'Wilfred is a bit of a muff, and Eleanor won't improve him, but by all means let them continue to be lovers. It is so rare in married people, that it would be a pity to see it at an end. Well, Elizabeth, I suppose you would rather remain here for a few months than join Wilfred and Eleanor in Spain?'

'Infinitely; but it depends on how I get on with your wife,' replied Elizabeth serenely. 'Devanha and Sophia expect to arrive at Wilderhaugh on the 11th. I had a note from her this morning. Are you going to ask anybody for the 12th?'

'My wife's mourning will prevent me doing so, even had I been inclined, but I was not thinking of it.'

'Oh, of course. I forgot Lady Lundie must live in comparative retirement for three months. That is unfortun

for me, for, of course, out of respect, I must follow her example. When is the funeral?'

'I did not ask; but I shall have to take chief part in it, I suppose. I believe there are no near male relatives.'

'Is there anything left for them to live upon?'

'Very little, I should say, except the place. It is worth about four hundred a year. That ought to keep them quietly.'

'It won't. Mrs. Franklin-Mayne is not the woman to live quietly, and she will have a new position now, you know, as your mother-in-law,' said Miss Lundie, enjoying the little home-thrust.

'I daresay you are right, Elizabeth,' he said indifferently, and took up a magazine, thus showing he did not desire to pursue the conversation.

Shortly thereafter Miss Lundie retired to her own room. Dinner was served at seven, and she did not like to be hurried in her dressing. About half-past six Sir William went up-stairs to his wife's sitting-room. She was lying on the couch still, but was awake, her fair arms folded above her golden head, her eyes fixed upon the waving tree-tops, just visible through the quaint old window. He saw there had been tears in these eyes but lately, for a glittering drop still trembled on the sweeping lashes.

'Have you rested, my love? It is time you were thinking of getting up. Seven is the dinner-hour; it is half-past six now.'

'Is it so late? I had no idea. I have been awake a long time; Clare ought to have come in,' she said, starting up.

'What were you thinking of when I caught that far-away look in your eyes, my darling?' he asked, laying a hand on her head, and bending his eyes searchingly on her face.

'Thinking of? Oh, a great many things. I could not tell you.'

'I do not like my wife to keep even her thoughts from me,' he said gravely.

She smiled up into his face, a smile which almost banished his jealous fancy.

'How could I tell you all my thoughts? How could I retain them so long? You know how swiftly they come and go,' she said. 'Has your sister gone to dress? Do you think she is pleased with me, William?'

'She thinks you will make a very dignified Lady Lundie,' he said evasively, for he could not tell her the truth.

'How strange that she should think so,' said Gertrude slowly.

When she rose she laid her hand on her husband's shoulder with a quick gesture, which caused her hair to slip from its fastening, and fall about her like a cloud.

'William,' she said, and her voice shook a little, 'I want to say something to you. Although I was so quiet, my heart was stirred when I looked upon this place and thought it was my home. I want to be happy here, to make you happy if I can. I want to be a good wife to you. Will you bear with me? and when I fail in some things, as I must and will, be gentle with me, and remember your wife has had no experience of life, and that she is very young.'

The sweet uplifted face shining in its purity and earnestness, the wide, pleading eyes, the trembling, eager voice, went to the man's heart, and once more all his better nature was roused. His arms closed about her, and he drew the sunny head to his breast.

'My darling, make me worthy of you,' he said hoarsely. 'I will try to be and do all you wish.'

She lifted her head and kissed him of her own accord for the first time. She was inexperienced and very young, as she had said, but if ever woman put up an earnest, almost agonizing prayer for help and guidance to walk the strong path of duty, Gertrude Lundie did that night. Come what might, she would be a true and faithful wife to this man, and if their marriage should prove unhappy and unblessed, the blame would not lie with her.

Clare made haste with her lady's toilet, and she was in the drawing-room a few minutes after Miss Lundie. She wore white cashmere, with trimmings of plush and lace, an exquisite dress, and exquisitely becoming to her girlish face. Her only ornament was a necklace of pearls, a gift from the work-people on her father's estate. Miss Lundie, attired in sapphire velvet, with ornaments of rubies and sapphires, was a more imposing-looking figure,—

'Like some rich exotic
Beside the lily of the vale.'

The dinner passed off pleasantly enough. Lady Lundie took her place with simplicity and dignity; there was no affectation of shyness or timidity. Sir William was delighted with her manner, and doubly delighted with her fair and delicate loveliness. He was in the best of moods, and was most solicitous and attentive to his wife.

Miss Lundie, noting these things, was reminded again that her reign at Castle Lundie was practically over. At times Gertrude felt conscious of a sense of discomfort in the presence of her sister-in-law. It was a vague feeling as yet, an inward fear that she was not regarded with favour by Elizabeth Lundie. She struggled against it, but she knew she would breathe more freely when she was gone. Sir William had not yet made known to his wife the arrangement that Elizabeth was to remain with them for some months. He thought it of no consequence himself, and imagined it would be a matter of equal indifference to his wife.

Immediately after breakfast next morning Sir William drove his wife over to Meadowflats. He must do what was required of him, but he regarded it as a very disagreeable duty. Mrs. Franklin-Mayne was astir, in close consultation with Macmillan's dressmaker, but when the carriage from Castle Lundie swept up to the door, she put on a becoming cap, and with a becoming expression of countenance she bustled down-stairs. Even her grief, and the presence of death in the house, could not subdue her airy grace of movement, her effusive impressiveness of manner.

'My dear, my precious child, let me look at you! let me see my Lady Lundie!' she exclaimed, clasping Gertrude in her arms. 'You look so well, so charming! but you have been free from this anxiety, this weary watching. Oh, Gertrude, my love, your poor father!'

'Hush, dear mother! it is well with him,' whispered Gertrude, in real compassion for her mother. 'His pain, his troubles are over now.'

'Yes, yes; that is the only consolation I have in my widowhood,' said Mrs. Mayne. 'Ah, William, how are you?' she added, as Sir William at that moment appeared. 'Little did we think last time we met so auspiciously in this room, what a change would befall us ere we met again.'

'I am extremely sorry for you, Mrs. Mayne,' said Sir William, rather awkwardly. The rôle of sympathizer did not suit him.

'Ah yes, I know you are, but none can feel as I do,' said Mrs. Mayne. 'Is Miss Lundie not with you?'

'No, but she also sympathizes with you in your bereavement,' said Sir William, although Elizabeth had not led him to believe that she was in any way sympathetic for the Franklin-Maynes. 'I have come to see if I can be of any service to you.'

Leaving her husband and her mother to discuss arrangements, Gertrude stole away to look for Caroline. She found her in the library, busy with the pile of letters the morning mail had brought. She looked somewhat astonished to see her sister, not having heard the carriage drive up to the door.

'You look better, much better to-day, dear,' she said, as they kissed each other. 'I trust you had a pleasant homecoming, and that you are pleased with your new home?'

'With Castle Lundie? Oh yes, it is lovely,' said Gertrude. 'I am sorry I spoke so wildly yesterday, Caroline. Think no more of it. I did my husband an injustice. I was selfish in my grief. He is very good to me.'

Caroline's eyes filled with tears. The ready confession, the eagerness to make amends, the utter unselfishness, were characteristic of Gertrude.

'God bless you, my darling, and make you happy in your married life,' she said fervently. 'If ever woman deserved to be happy, you do.'

The sisters went together again to look their last upon their father's face. And again new strength and patience seemed to come to Gertrude in the presence of that unbroken, ineffable peace. The visit was not much prolonged, and, with the promise to come again to-morrow, Sir William and his wife took their leave.

They drove home through the town, greatly to the excitement of the good people of Rumford. As they passed Docter Dunsyre's house, Lady Lundie looked up eagerly, but the blinds were all drawn, and it was evidently shut up. She remembered then that it had long been their custom to spend the month of July with their relatives at Craigcrook.

'There have been great improvements made here, I understand,' said Sir William, as they neared the lower end of the town. 'These bran-new cottages look very well, and will doubtless pay the young man who has made a speculation of them; but to my mind the old Watergate was the most picturesque part of Rumford. It was a pity to demolish it; young Strathearn's doing, wasn't it?'

Never for a moment while he was speaking did Sir William's eyes quit his wife's face. Conscious of his keen scrutiny,—conscious, too, of its hidden meaning,—she flushed deeply.

'If you had been as familiar with the interior of the old Watergate as I was, William, you would agree with me in thinking that Mr. Strathearn has been a benefactor to the town. It was a frightful place, not at all fit for human beings to live in.'

'It is to be hoped the town Mr. Strathearn has so benefited will support his actions as enthusiastically as you do,' said Sir William drily.

Gertrude bit her lip. Oh, why did he try her thus? why could he not keep the peace made between them? why was it that something within so continually rose up against him, urging her to say many bitter things which would make war between them? It seemed to her that under his influence her very nature was undergoing a change. In the old, sweet, peaceful days, there had been no such bitter feelings in her heart. There was no more said until they met Doctor Dunsyre driving in his gig towards the town. He raised his hat, and Sir William rather stiffly returned the salutation.

'Couldn't we stop, William?' said his wife quickly. 'I should like to speak to him, to ask for his sister. She was my very dear friend.'

'My love, it is better not. I don't want to hurt you, but it will not do for Lady Lundie to make a very dear friend of a country doctor's sister. You will require to make friends now in your own rank in life.'

Lady Lundie did not reply, but she turned her head away so that he could not see her face.

'Has Elizabeth told you that at my request she will make her home with us for a time?' he asked, when they had

passed the gates and were leisurely driving up the avenue. His wife, with a start, brought her eyes back to his face.

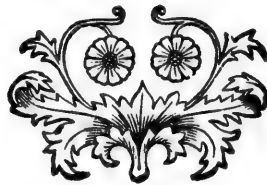
'No. *Is* she to remain, William?'

'For a time, yes. It will be better for you. There are many things pertaining to your position—trifles in themselves, perhaps, but all-important because they put the finishing touches to the manners of a woman of rank, and of which you are necessarily ignorant. In these matters my sister, long accustomed to the usages of the best society, will be invaluable to you. On that account I have asked her to remain. She has kindly consented to do so.'

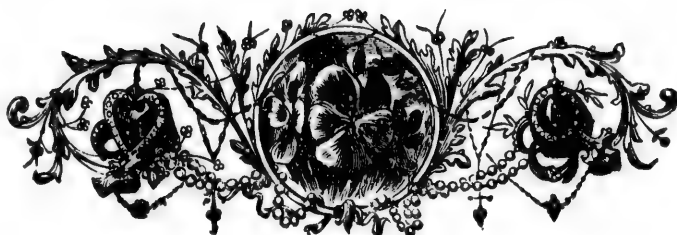
'Am I so very ignorant? Have I given you cause to be ashamed of me in any way, William, that you think it necessary to make your sister my monitor?' inquired Gertrude, with a little flash of passion in her eyes.

'My love, your demeanour is perfection, because it is modest and unassuming, but something more is necessary. Do not look so angry, though that flush enhances your loveliness; but trust me to know what is best for your interests, which, of course, must be mine.'

'Since you made the arrangement without first consulting me, without inquiring even whether it would be to my comfort or liking, I have no more to say, William,' said Lady Landie. 'Only I fear you have made a mistake.'



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CHAPTER IV.

DISCORD.

THE Countess of Devanha is in the drawing-room, my lady,' said Clare, entering her mistress's sitting-room on the morning of the 13th of August.

Lady Lundie looked slightly surprised. She had heard that the Earl and his wife had only arrived at Wilderhaugh on the previous evening, so that her neighbour had lost no time in coming to pay her respects.

'Is Miss Lundie indoors, Clare?' she asked, as she rose from her book.

'No, my lady. I saw her go out about half an hour ago. She had the dogs with her, and went in the direction of the lake,' answered Clare.

Lady Lundie remembered the Countess of Devanha very well—remembered, too, how she had snubbed her mother and looked askance at Caroline on the night of the county ball. Gertrude herself had been beneath the notice of the imperious beauty, and it was with a slight feeling of curiosity that she anticipated their first meeting now.

She opened the door and advanced into the room, a composed and graceful figure in a spotless white cambric dress, with knots of black ribbon down the front skirt, in token of her mourning. The sleeves were very short, and showed the exquisite contour of the round white arms, unadorned by

bracelets or cuffs. Her appearance was simple and girlish in the extreme, but she was a fair picture even in contrast with Sophia Devanha's subtle Eastern loveliness. The visitor was elaborately attired, and looked her best. She came forward with a smile on her lips, but in her eyes keenest scrutiny of the girl-wife.

'Good morning, Lady Devanha,' said Gertrude simply, but with perfect grace and composure of manner. 'I am pleased to see you.'

The courteous bow and the accompanying smile did not appear to satisfy Sophia Devanha. She advanced still nearer, and laid one daintily gloved hand on the slender shoulder.

'William Lundie's wife must be no stranger to me,' she said, in the most winning tones of an exquisite voice. 'My dear Lady Lundie, your husband and I were old and dear friends in India. I trust you will not regard me in the light of a mere visiting acquaintance. I am prepared to love you very much.'

'You are very kind, Lady Devanha,' said Gertrude quietly, and slightly drew herself away from that clinging touch. There had sprung up a vague distrust of this woman, a feeling that, in spite of her sweet words, she was insincere. Lady Devanha saw the slight gesture, divined its meaning, and immediately seated herself.

'I must congratulate you upon your marriage with my old friend, who, in spite of certain small weaknesses common to his kind, is one of the best of men,' she said familiarly. 'And I must congratulate *him* upon his choice. You remind me of some lovely flower; but you are so young—far too young, my dear Lady Lundie, to have entered upon the cares of matrimony.'

Gertrude was at a loss what to say. She resented her visitor's manner and speech with her whole soul, but she dared not say so, because the law of society compels you to endure polite rudeness in your own house, and make no sign.

'I do not find matrimonial cares weighing very heavily upon me, Lady Devanha,' she answered a trifle stiffly.

Lady Devanha smiled, and showed two rows of teeth like loveliest pearls.

'Twere a pity if you did. The honeymoon is not over yet; and, of course, everything must be as yet *couleur de rose*.

But, my dear, I am older than you and more worldly-wise, and on that account you will permit me to give you a word of advice regarding your treatment of your husband. Remember that the best of us can be spoiled by indulgence, and do not give your husband too much of his own way. I knew him long before you did, and I speak purely out of regard for you, you are so young and so inexperienced. But be firm at first, and you will never regret it.'

'I scarcely understand you, Lady Devanha,' said the girl-wife, with flushing face and kindling eye. 'If you please we will change the subject. I am not accustomed to discuss my husband with strangers.'

'I beg your pardon, Lady Lundie; I asked you to overlook anything I might say on the score of an old friendship. I will endeavour not to offend again,' said Lady Devanha, not at all disconcerted. 'You have no visitors for the shooting, I suppose?'

'None. I am in mourning, as you see, for my father,' answered Gertrude. 'Have you a number at Wilderhaugh?'

'Oh yes. The Earl has always filled Wilderhaugh with men for the 12th. It is a bore sometimes, but has to be endured,' said the Countess. 'Has Sir William gone out with his gun this morning?'

'Yes, he went off to the Haugh Muir with Colonel Graham immediately after breakfast.'

'Oh, then, he will likely meet our party. I heard them say they intended to shoot over the Haugh. Do you think you will like Castle Lundie?'

'It would be strange indeed if I did not like my home, Lady Devanha,' answered Gertrude quickly. Her endurance had nearly reached its limit now. She did not know why this woman, who, in spite of her rank, had neither the instincts nor the outward refinement of a lady, should thus question her. She wondered if such were the usages of that society of which her husband so frequently spoke. If so, she and it must be strangers to each other.

'Well, it is a fine old place. Is Miss Lundie not with you? I expected to see her.'

'Yes; she has gone out, my maid told me, to give the dogs an airing. If you are anxious to see her I can send a servant to tell her you are here'—

'Oh no, I can see her again. Is it true what she led me to believe—that she is to remain an inmate of your home, Lady Lundie?'

'Such is the arrangement,' replied Lady Lundie, and rose. She could bear no more. The Countess rose also.

'I never heard of anything so absurd. It will *never* do, Lady Lundie. That is one of the things in which you ought to have been firm. It is always a mistake to have relatives living in the house, especially in the case of a newly-married pair. I know Elizabeth Lundie very well, and I fear her presence will not materially add to your happiness. I would advise you to try and get that arrangement set aside. You will get your husband to do anything for you at present.'

'I will bid you good morning, Lady Devanha,' said Gertrude very coldly.

She was very pale now, but the heaving of the breast, the slight trembling of the white hand resting on the cabinet beside her, told of a tumult within.

'Ah, I see I have vexed you. My dear Lady Lundie, you will soon grow accustomed to our ways. We are frightfully impertinent to each other, and we must know all about our neighbours, so that we can make our comments on their proceedings,' said Lady Devanha, with a silvery laugh. 'Of course you are shocked, as I was when I came out first. Your frank and unstudied simplicity is charming, like the dew on the morning flowers. I don't marvel that Sir William was enthralled. But that will soon wear away, and then it requires diplomacy in a wife to keep her husband devoted to her. Of course I seem a shocking kind of creature to you now, but I am talking common sense. Some day you will remember my words, and admit that I was right. Will you shake hands with me now?'

'I would rather not, Lady Devanha,' said the fair young wife, quietly but clearly.

'Ah, well, I am not offended. I have lived too long, and seen too much, to take offence at trifles. But I will just repeat that I have not spoken out of malice, but only as a woman of the world, if she is honest, would speak to a young, inexperienced girl like you. I think your husband will bring you to Wüderhaugh—at least I will ask him. In the meantime, *au revoir*.'

She inclined her beautiful head, smiled her sweetest smile, and left the room. But she had left a strange sting behind. When she was alone the young wife threw herself on a couch and burst into tears. It was very foolish—childish, perhaps—but her heart was overcharged, her mind filled with terrible dread of the future, unutterable shrinkings from the world to which her married life had introduced her.

As the carriage rolled away from the doors of Castle Lundie, Lady Devanha caught sight of Miss Lundie coming leisurely along a narrow path which led to the lake. She immediately bade the coachman stop, and waited till her friend came up.

'Sophia, is it possible? You have lost no time!' exclaimed Miss Lundie in astonishment.

'My dear, I was dying to see your brother's wife, so, at the risk of appearing rude to my guests, I came across this morning. But I have only the Trevor girls with me as yet, and they are off to lunch with the sportsmen on the Haugh. And how are you?'

'Very well. You look charming, Sophia.'

'Oh, I am very well. Eric was telling me only this morning I look younger every day,' said the Countess laughingly. 'Well, I have seen the young wife, Elizabeth.'

'And what is your opinion?'

Lady Devanha shrugged her shoulders.

'She is charming, as sweet and fresh as one of these daises, but she is far too good for your brother, *ma amie*. She will be miserable with him,' she answered, with characteristic candour. 'Did she care for him, or was it the actual case of marriage for rank and position?'

Miss Lundie nodded.

'She has a terrible old mother who hurried it on. Lady Lundie herself estimates rank and position very slightly. But for all that she knows her position, and can hold her own in Castle Lundie.'

'I thought so. These unobtrusive, insignificant women can generally do so in a quiet but decided way,' said the Countess. 'She virtually dismissed me from her presence because I ventured to give her a piece of friendly advice.'

Miss Lundie laughed.

'I could believe that. My sister-in-law does not care to be

advised, as I have found out already. I am afraid we will not live very happily *en famille*, Sophia.'

'Oh, nonsense! I am sure she is very sweet and amiable; and if you manage skilfully you might get everything your own way. Make yourself amiable,—indispensable, if possible, to your brother's comfort,—and you will remain a fixture here. Men are essentially selfish creatures,—your brother particularly so,—I have heard you say frequently.'

'Yes, William is not unselfish by any means; and, Sophia, I think he begins to see already that his wife does not care about him. She is so free from hypocrisy, you understand; she will affect nothing she does not feel, and in that she is her own enemy.'

'You are right; but, as I told her this morning, time and experience will make her worldly-wise. Come over to Wilderhaugh soon, Elizabeth. The Trevors are no companions for me, and until next week, when Mrs. Tremaine and Lady Watercourt come, I am practically alone.'

'Very well; perhaps I will come to-morrow. Must you go? Good morning. I am glad I did not miss you.'

'So am I, though my visit to-day was to Lady Lundie. Well, my love, *au revoir*, and remember my advice,' said the Countess gaily, and at a word from her the coachman gave the bays the rein, and the carriage was rapidly whirled away.

Miss Lundie went straight to the drawing-room, but Lady Lundie had retired to her own apartments, where Elizabeth had never yet dared to intrude. Although living under one roof, these two were strangers to each other, and would be to the end. Habitually kind and gentle though she was towards her sister-in-law, Gertrude could not make a friend or a confidante of her. They were simply at peace with each other—that was all.

Watching from her window towards four o'clock in the afternoon, Lady Lundie saw her husband coming up the avenue, followed by one of the keepers with a full game-bag over his shoulder.

She turned away at once and went down-stairs, and met him just as he entered the house.

'How late you are, William! We expected you home to lunch. Have you had anything to eat?' she asked.

'Yes. We met Devanha and his party on the Haugh and lunched with them,' he answered, and, bending towards her, lightly touched her cheek with his lips. 'We had splendid sport, but I feel quite fagged. I suppose I am not so able for tramping over moor and fen as I was last time I shot over the Haugh. A good many Twelfths have come and gone since then. How pale you are. Have you not been out to-day?'

'No; I have been busy indoors,' she answered evasively. 'I have ordered tea to be served in the little library, thinking you would not care to enter the drawing-room in your dusty garments.'

'I'll come, but I shall want something more exhilarating than tea after my hard day's work,' he answered. 'Is Elizabeth out?'

'Yes; she has gone to Rumford to do some shopping. She said that she would not be home to tea,' replied Gertrude, as she entered the small library, a tiny snuggerly opening off the outside hall.

'You ought to have gone with her. I can't have you moping so much at home; it is not good for you,' he said, with some severity.

'She did not ask me to accompany her,' replied his wife, in a low voice. 'Lady Devanha was here this morning, William.'

Sir William's face brightened.

'Ah, I knew she would come soon, but I hardly expected she would lose so little time; but Sophia was always the soul of kindness. Well, my love, I am sure you would be much pleased with her?'

'She is very beautiful, certainly,' said Gertrude quietly.

'Oh, all the world knows that. That is not what I mean. Were you not charmed with her manner, her gracious and queenly frankness, her winning way? Few can resist her.'

'I do not like Lady Devanha, William,' said Gertrude candidly.

Sir William looked annoyed.

'Why, my love, that is most extraordinary. You should guard against being influenced by prejudice, Gertrude. *Why* do you not like her? Is it the jealousy one pretty woman feels of another that has poisoned your little heart?'

Lady Lundie's face flushed.

'How can you say such things to me, William? Lady Devanha is so much more beautiful than I that there can be no comparison between us,' she said quickly. 'It is the woman I dislike, not her appearance. I do not want to be uncharitable or unkind, but I felt, and feel still, that she is not sincere. I do not think she is a good woman.'

Sir William's brow darkened.

'My dear girl, you have no right to say such things about a lady in the Countess of Devanha's position. She is lovely and accomplished, and one of the queens of society. You ought to be proud if she vouchsafes you her friendship. It will be simply invaluable to you. I have known her for years, and the lively, vivacious way and off-hand manner of speech which doubtless offended your fastidious taste are only the natural overflow of a light and happy heart. It is my desire that you cultivate the friendship of Lady Devanha.'

Lady Lundie walked over to the window, and there was a moment's painful silence.

Then Sir William followed her, and, laying his hand on her shoulder, turned her face round to him.

'You must not turn away from me every time I speak to you, Gertrude. Do you remember now your promise, to be a faithful and dutiful wife to me? Is this the fulfilment of that promise?'

'You try me very hard, William. Am I to have no wishes, no opinions even, of my own?'

'Now you are absurd. Upon your own showing you are ignorant and inexperienced, and should therefore permit me to be your guide in such matters as the choice of your friends. Are your interests not mine? Would I be likely to ask you to cultivate any friendship which would not do honour to me? You have many things to learn yet. I'—

The servant entered the room with the tea-tray, and Lady Lundie breathed a sigh of relief. But directly they were alone Sir William resumed the subject.

'Tell me wherein Lady Devanha offended your taste this morning?'

'She spoke as no lady ought to have spoken,' said Gertrude, quietly still, but firmly. 'She offered me advice about my married life which I would not have received from the lips of

my own mother. But what right has Lady Devanha to question me upon my most private affairs? Although she is an old friend of my husband's, she is a stranger to me, and as such I received her.'

'Poor Sophia! she was always so ingenuous and warm-hearted, so ready with her rattling speech, she did not know what a little Tartar she had to deal with to-day!' he said, in a half-amused, half scornful way, which sent the sensitive blood surging again to his wife's pale cheek. 'But there, my love, we will make peace for to-day. Why do you vex me so? You compel me to speak sternly to you, you are sometimes so foolishly childish. Come, kiss me, and let me see you smile.'

But the sensitive heart was too deeply wounded, and, though she kissed him as he desired, no smile came upon the sweet, sad mouth.

'I want you to go out of doors more, Gertrude,' said Sir William presently. 'I must take you to Wilderhaugh, I think, to-morrow. Devanha has two charming girl-cousins there at present, who would do you a world of good. If you would only exhibit a little more animation, my love, you would be infinitely more charming.'

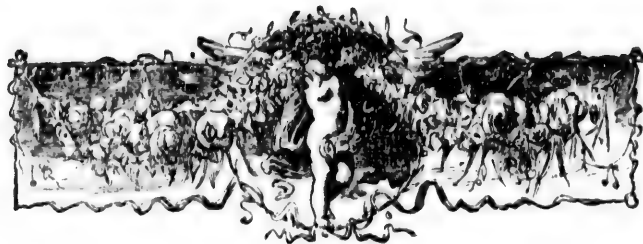
'I was thinking to-day, William, that if you would allow me I would ask mamma and Caroline to come over for a few days. It would be a pleasant change for them and for me. When you are out so much I am often lonely,' said Gertrude timidly.

'My love, that is a somewhat serious request, but I have no objections to your sister coming for a week. You can write to her to that effect, if you like, or send a carriage for her, whichever you please.'

'You would not have me ask her to leave mamma at present, William?' said Gertrude slowly.

'My love, doubtless your mother is a very estimable woman. I admire her diplomatic skill, but I—I cannot say I have any great liking for her. In fact, I would much rather she remained at Meadowflats. I am afraid my bearing towards her would not altogether satisfy you.'

'Very well, William, there is no more to be said,' answered Lady Lundie, but she bent her head to hide one bitter tear which started in her eye. Verily her cross was growing heavier every day. At times it seemed more than she could bear.



CHAPTER V.

UNASKED, UNSOUGHT.

DO you want the carriage this afternoon, Lady Lundie?' asked Elizabeth Lundie at lunch the following day.

The arrangement to go to Wilderhaugh had to be set aside, because Sir William had been summoned to Edinburgh to a meeting of a Company of which he was a director.

'No. Were you thinking of driving out, Elizabeth?'

'Only to Rumford. I am having some morning dresses made at Macmillan's, and he was to have patterns to-day. He offered to send them up, of course, but I said I would call.'

'I will drive you if you like, Elizabeth,' said Lady Lundie.

Her wedding gifts from the tenants on the Castle estates had been a phaeton and a pair of lovely cream-coloured ponies, which as yet she had never driven herself.

'If it will not trouble you I shall be much obliged, but it will keep you waiting while I am in Macmillan's.'

'Not at all. I can make a call, for that matter,' replied Gertrude. 'It is such a lovely day, we will enjoy the drive.'

It was the first time they had appeared in public together, and it can readily be imagined that the sight of the lovely little equipage and its occupants created quite a stir in

Bamford. It drew up at Macmillan's, where both ladies alighted. Miss Lundie, however, entered the shop alone, while Lady Lundie, leaving the phaeton in charge of the footman, walked rather quickly up the street to Doctor Dunsyre's door, at which she knocked.

When Miss Dunsyre's housemaid saw Lady Lundie on the step, she looked more than surprised.

'How are you, Sarah?' said Lady Lundie, in the old, frank, kindly way. 'Is Miss Dunsyre at home? and do you think I could see her?'

'Yes, miss—my lady, I mean,' said Sarah, recovering her equanimity. 'Will you please to step up to the drawing-room?'

'Thanks; do not trouble to announce me. I used to be quite at home here,' answered Lady Lundie, and ran lightly up the familiar staircase to the drawing-room.

Miss Dunsyre was sitting with her back to the door, busy, as usual, with some wool-work for a bazaar. Work of that kind was never out of her hands, and she was an adept in the making of all these pretty but rather useless trifles which are largely in request at fancy fairs. She was so absorbed that she did not hear the door open, but a light footfall crossing the floor startled her, and she hurriedly rose. Seeing the intruder, she seemed unusually disturbed.

'Gertrude!—Lady Lundie, I mean. Is it possible?' she exclaimed rather awkwardly.

'Yes; since you would not come to me, I have come to you, Margaret,' said Gertrude, with a strange, sad smile. 'May I sit down here as I used to do?'

'Assuredly,' said Margaret, and with nervous hand pulled in a low chair and placed a footstool for her visitor. Then she sat down herself, and there was a minute's awkward silence. Looking at the pure, sweet face of her old friend, Margaret Dunsyre felt uncomfortable in the extreme to-night. She had not been loyal to her, but had attributed ungenerous motives to her actions, and pronounced judgment upon her,—a judgment untempered by love.

'I do not think you look very well, Lady Lundie,' she said presently. 'You are so pale, and much thinner than you were. I was very grieved when your father died.'

'Were you? I fancied you had forgotten all about me,' said Gertrude simply.

'No, I had not, but I remembered the difference in our positions. I could scarcely hope to retain Lady Lundie's friendship, though I was so happy as to possess that of Gertrude Mayne,' said Margaret, not gently nor humbly, but in a clear, hard voice, which had a ring of resentment in it.

A look of wonder and pain crossed the pale face of Lady Lundie.

'I did not think *you* would speak like that. All the world seems changed to me,' she said, in a strange, sad, wearied voice. 'Well, I must go, I think, Margaret. Good-bye.'

Then Margaret Dunsyre's heart smote her.

'Forgive me; I thought *you* would be changed,' she said hurriedly. 'Stay and take tea with me as you used to do, and we will be friends as of old.'

'Thank you, Margaret, but I cannot stay to-day. I am driving my sister-in-law, who is shopping at Macmillan's. Very likely she is waiting for me there,' said Gertrude quietly. 'Good-bye.'

She held out her hand, and Margaret took it. Then they looked for a moment at each other without speaking. They presented as great a contrast as they had done one memorable evening nearly a year ago in that same room. Yet there was a change in the one. Margaret was the same picture of health, and womanliness, and conscious beauty; but about Gertrude there was a strange and pathetic loveliness, an indescribable mingling of dignity and grace, very different from the old shy, girlish quietude. And her face was still one to be preferred, because it had fulfilled its early promise, and was the faithful index to the unselfish heart, the true and faithful soul within.

'Good-bye, Margaret,' she repeated, and her eyes filled with tears. 'Since our ways must be apart, I suppose we cannot meet again on the old footing. But as long as I live I will never forget what you were to me in the past. I will never have another friend like you.'

Margaret Dunsyre's lips were sealed, and they parted in

absolute silence. But Margaret's afternoon was spoiled, and she could fix her mind neither upon work, books, nor music.

Lady Lundie found her sister-in-law seated in the carriage awaiting her coming, and the ponies' heads were at once turned towards home. They drove in silence, for they had few subjects in common, and Lady Lundie's mind was engrossed with her own thoughts. The sight of that familiar room, with which was associated so many bitter-sweet memories, had stirred her heart in no ordinary degree. Her visit had been a mistake, and she could have wished it recalled.

'Take care, Gertrude; here is a conveyance coming. It is close upon us!' cried Miss Lundie in alarm, when they sharply turned one of the windings in the road. Gertrude looked up and drew rein so sharply that the ponies stood still. The dogcart, in which were two gentlemen, the younger driving, was at once carefully drawn to one side to allow the ladies to pass.

The driver took off his hat, Lady Lundie bowed hurriedly, and they passed on. Miss Lundie recognised them as the Strathearns, father and son. Chancing to glance at her sister-in-law's face as she neared them, she saw it suffused with deepest crimson, and a strange look in her eyes, which revealed something hitherto undreamed of. And, like a flash of lightning, many things were made plain in a moment of time to Elizabeth Lundie's far-seeing mind.

'Who are these ladies, John?' asked old Mr. Strathearn when they were out of hearing.

'Sir William Lundie's wife and sister, father,' John answered quietly enough, but the flush had not died yet from *his* face, and the hand on the reins had lost a little of its accustomed steadiness.

'The one in the black bonnet of course must be the wife,' said the old man musingly. 'She has a sweet face, but she looks very fragile and very young. Her husband must be double her age.'

'I have no idea,' said John. 'See, father, yonder is the new Watergate. Now, hasn't it an imposing appearance from here?'

'Ay, ay, so it has,' said the old man. 'Dear me, it will be a great improvement. I am glad I was able to come and see

it to-day. You see, winter will be upon us before we know where we are.'

'Nonsense, father! this is only the middle of August,' said John cheerily. 'We must not think of winter for three months yet.'

The old gentleman had been very poorly all the summer, and this was the first time he had been able to take the drive to the town. John had pled that the carriage might be taken out for him, it was so much more comfortable than the open dogcart, but his father stoutly declined. The Redlands carriage had never been seen upon the roads nor in the town since the Sabbath day on which it conveyed Mrs. Strathearn to the parish church of Rumford for the last time, a fortnight before her death, and it was a fancy of the old man's that it should not be turned out again until it carried a young mistress of Redlands to church for the first time.

Father and son drove to the mills first, where an hour and a half was spent in a minute inspection of the establishment. The employés were unfeignedly glad to see the old master, for, like his son, he was greatly beloved. The bond between the Strathearns and their mill hands was not only that of master and servant; it was friendly in its nature, and was cemented by many kindnesses given and received. There never were any differences between them, and it was rare indeed that any change took place in the establishment, except in the case of death or disability, when a younger man was promoted, and an outsider engaged to make the number complete.

The old master was particular and fidgety in his inspection of the familiar place which had absorbed the best energies of his manhood, but John was not hasty or impatient even with him. He explained the new machinery and improved modes of working with elaborate clearness.

'Ay, ay, the old concern, I see, is all right in your hands, my lad,' said his father, in tones of the utmost satisfaction. 'I see you will keep up with the times, ahead of them, if possible, and that too without incurring any rash or needless expenditure.'

'For which you may compliment yourself, dad, since you trained me,' John said. 'Ay, if success in business were the main thing, I ought to be a happy man.'

The old master said nothing, though he knew very well the thought that was in his son's mind.

'Now we will drive through the Watergate and then home, John,' he said. 'I am tired already, but I'm glad I came to-day.'

'You deserve to be tired, dad, seeing you would not be advised against exploring every nook and cranny of the mill,' said John, as he helped him into the trap. 'Mind, I won't let you out to explore the new houses. You must be content with an outside view to-day.'

The old man was not inclined to disobey, for he was already wearied out. But he expressed his utmost admiration of the clean, tidy rows of pretty cottages, so great an improvement upon the old rickety houses. John listened in rather an uninterested fashion. He had lost taste of his new property, and seldom went up the Watergate, although it was the nearer way to the centre of the town. Nobody knew the secret of the Watergate scheme; it had never occurred even to David Dunsyre to connect Gertrude Mayne with John's interest in improving that disreputable part of the town. Old Mr. Strathearn's appearance in Rumford was quite an event, and so many people stopped to speak to him, and to congratulate him on being able to come down again, that it was nearly five o'clock before the horse's head got fairly turned towards home.

'I'll just have time to drive you home, eat my dinner with you, and come back, dad,' said John. 'I have an engagement with David at eight o'clock.'

'That's all right, John. I'll be glad enough to lie down after dinner, so I won't miss you so much,' replied his father. 'Really, I had no idea I would be so easily tired. I suppose it's the fresh air.'

'Yes, and the long seat in this trap,' said John severely. 'You see, you would not be advised.'

Marjorie Fleming was growing quite anxious about the old master, and was considerably relieved when the dogcart drove up to the door. She also severely reproved John for keeping him out so late, just as a mother or nurse might have scolded over late hours for a child. To me there is always something mournfully pathetic in the helplessness and feebleness of age, which has indeed been fitly termed a second childhood.

John rode in to the town the second time, put up his horse at the mill stables, and walked up to the Doctor's house. It was a lovely evening, the air mild and pleasant, yet bracing; the whole world bathed in the radiance of a full harvest moon. A fine dry seed-time, and a long, hot summer had hastened the harvest; and though it was but the middle of August, reapers were busy everywhere. The shops closed at seven in Rumford, and there were few people abroad in the High Street—the upper end, indeed, was quite deserted. It was ten minutes to eight by the town clock when John knocked at the Doctor's door, scarcely expecting to find that much-occupied individual ready for him. He was right. Sarah informed him her master had been called out about a quarter of an hour ago, but as it was only round to the Crescent, he did not expect to be detained. John nodded, hung up his hat, and walked straight up to the drawing-room. He found Margaret there, as he expected, and was somewhat astonished to find her idle. He often teased her about her untiring industry. She rose with a smile, and they shook hands cordially.

'David will not be long, I think, John,' she said. 'Sit down and tell me why you didn't bring your father to see me to-day.'

'He was too much fatigued for one thing, and we were late enough out,' John answered. 'How are you? I have not seen you for a week or two.'

'No. You are quite a stranger now in your old haunts,' replied Margaret, playing with the tassels of the antimacassar over the end of the couch beside her. 'Have we done aught to offend?'

'Don't ask stupid questions, Margaret,' said John, with a slight smile. 'I have been occupied one way and another, and'—

'You didn't want to come,' persisted Margaret wilfully. 'If it were not for David, I would never behold you at all.'

'Well, perhaps not,' said John a trifle absently, and turned over the pages of a book lying on the gipsy table at his side. It was not a very gallant speech, but he was out of sorts, and he felt sufficiently at home with Margaret Dunsyre to be rather careless at times of the strict rules of politeness. Her sweet lips curled with displeasure, and she deliberately broke the slender cord of the tassel with which she was playing.

'Do you know you are very rude to me, John?' she said presently.

He shut the book and looked at her somewhat questioningly. He had never thought much about Margaret Dunsyre at any time; but as he looked at her that night, it occurred to him that she was prettier than he had imagined. The soft grey cashmere dress, with its becoming knots of blue ribbon, the dainty lace and tasteful ornaments, the fair, refined face, the haughty head with the coils of sunny hair, the whole graceful appearance of the woman struck him, and it occurred to him to wonder why no man had as yet found out that she was beautiful, and had told her so.

'I beg your pardon, Margaret—I did not mean to be rude,' he said sincerely. 'Come, show me you forgive me by singing that lovely air of Schubert's. It has been running in my head since I heard you sing it last.'

'I am not in a mood for singing to-night,' said Margaret petulantly. 'I had a visitor to-day. Can you guess who it was?'

'It is no unusual thing for you to have a visitor. How am I to fix upon the right one?' he asked teasingly. 'Tell me, and put me out of suspense.'

'Lady Lundie,' she answered instantly, and the keen blue eyes looked sharply at the face of her listener as she uttered the words. She saw it change, and he immediately rose.

'Indeed! Is this the first time Lady Lundie has called?' he asked, and he walked over to a water-colour sketch of Old Rumford, and stood contemplating it while he awaited her answer.

'Of course it is. She has just been three weeks at home. She will not come again,' said Margaret quickly.

'Why not?'

'Because I showed her—told her, indeed—that we could not be friends. I will be patronized by no woman, John.'

'Do you think it is in Lady Lundie's nature to patronize any one, Margaret, especially an old friend?' asked John; and he turned about again and looked her straight in the face. He did not like the manner in which she spoke; nay, more, to him it was perfectly inexplicable, and very unlike the woman he took Margaret Dunsyre to be.

'It would be pardonable, I suppose, if she did, for, of course, her position is greatly changed,' said Margaret. 'But if she is not unhappy, I am no judge of another woman's expression. It is my opinion that she will pay for her ambition.'

'Margaret, don't speak like that. It is unlike you. It vexes me,' said John quickly, almost sternly. 'Lady Lundie's happiness or unhappiness really concerns herself alone. If it must be discussed, leave it to those meaner-minded people whose delight it is to lay bare the sorrows of others to the public. It is altogether unworthy of you.'

Under his rebuke Margaret's pale face flushed and her eyes filled with tears. It was a moment of strange weakness for her; her pride, her reserve, her reticence seemed to be in a moment swept away. John did not dream of the danger of that moment. His heart, absolutely cold towards Margaret Dunsyre, could not be touched by any kindred feeling to hers.

'Forgive me, John; I will not vex you again,' she said. 'Only don't speak to me like that; it breaks my heart.'

He turned to her once more with real concern. But before he could speak she raised her flushed face, and her eyes looked straight into his. In a moment the scales fell from his eyes, and the heart of the woman before him was revealed to him. An answering flush rose to his brow and dyed it red.

'I will go and meet David, Margaret,' he said abruptly; and turning upon his heel quitted the room and the house.

But he forgot all about his engagement with David, and turned his face towards his home. We will not follow him. Knowing the man, having had some glimpses of his noble nature, we can guess what that revelation meant for him. The night hours were spent in stern self-examination. He brought himself face to face with every action, every word he had ever spoken to Margaret Dunsyre, and he came out of the ordeal blameless. In his heart there was none of that half-contemptuous pity for the woman who, in a moment of weakness, had laid aside the veil of her absolute reserve, which in a meaner man would assuredly have had a place. But if ever man's heart was filled with sorrow, with bitter pain and unavailing regret, his was that night; and if it seemed to him that the pathway of life was needlessly full of thorns, he may be forgiven.



CHAPTER VI.

VISITORS FOR CASTLE LUNDIE.

I THINK I will drive over to Castle Lundie this morning, Caroline,' said Mrs. Franklin-Mayne at breakfast. 'It is really perfectly disgraceful that Gertrude has never asked us to pay her a visit there.'

'The matter may not be in Gertrude's hands, mamma,' said Caroline gently.

'Oh, nonsense! If it isn't she ought to take it into her own hands. What is the use of a woman having a house of her own if she cannot ask whom she likes best to it? She ought to have her own way now, and can safely take it; it was different before.'

Caroline smiled slightly. She knew very well what her mother meant.

'If Gertrude had any proper feeling or gratitude,' persisted Mrs. Mayne rather wrathfully, 'she would have you frequently at Castle Lundie. It is no more than her duty to try to secure an advantageous settlement in life for you. And among the society to which she has entrance now you would have the best of chances.'

In times gone such a speech might have provoked a little good-humoured scorn on Caroline's part, but now it touched a deeper chord. That very love which in a moment of foolish pride she had put away from her, had made Caroline Mayne

what she had never been before, womanly in heart and feeling. Therefore her mother's words jarred upon her, and she showed it in her face.

'Really, Caroline, I have not been able to comprehend you of late. You have changed, and not for the better. I have none left to sympathize with me in my struggles for my family,' said Mrs. Mayne, wiping away a tear, which was more angry than sorrowful.

'Dear mamma, why should you struggle any longer?' said Caroline. 'Let Gertrude's great position satisfy you. Believe me, I am very well content to live quietly here with you. I am not at all envious of Gertrude's lot, nor have I any desire to make what you call an advantageous settlement in life.'

Mrs. Mayne stared at her elder daughter with something of alarm and anxiety in her look.

'Are you quite well, Caroline?' she asked; 'or are you going to die like your poor father?'

'No, no, mamma, I am perfectly well. Perhaps things are beginning to look a little different to me, that is all,' answered Caroline, unable to resist a smile at her mother's half-comical, half-serious question.

'I'm sure I hope you are quite well,' said Mrs. Mayne rather doubtfully. 'Will you get ready and go with me?'

'Yes, I am quite willing. There is nothing in a morning call to make Sir William think us officious,' said Caroline.

'And pray, who has more right to be officious if I choose?' queried Mrs. Mayne almost hysterically. 'Am I not his wife's mother? I ought to go in and out of Castle Lundie as I please.'

'Dear mother, Gertrude's husband has already made it apparent to us that he has no desire for us to be intimate in his house. It will be better for Gertrude that we should not intrude. It might cause disagreement between them, and you know as well as I do that there is little need for us to add to her care.'

Caroline spoke with an earnestness which was almost passion, and Mrs. Mayne had no more to say. But unless she became a power in Castle Lundie, the glory of being able to speak of 'my daughter, Lady Lundie' was shorn of its chief lustre.

The morning was frittered away by Mrs. Mayne almost in idleness, in choosing what would be the most imposing garb in which to appear at Castle Lundie, consequently the drive had to be postponed till after lunch, and as they drove round by the town it was nearly four o'clock before they reached the Castle. It was to find it deserted by its inmates, who had gone to spend the day at Wilderhaugh.

'Really, Caroline, I am not able to go back all these miles without refreshment. I shall just go in and ask one of the servants to get me a cup of tea—surely a very little thing for a mother to ask in her daughter's house,' said Mrs. Mayne; and, as she appeared quite decided, Caroline was obliged to obey. But she took the asking into her own hands, and, as she could be winning and frank enough when she chose, the servant was only too willing to grant her request, and they were ushered into the drawing-room.

Mrs. Mayne was in a state of subdued excitement, for this was her first visit to the Castle, and she was rapturous over everything. Of such a royal abode she had often dreamed, but had never yet been permitted to enter. Caroline looked round the magnificent but decidedly gloomy drawing-room with a somewhat mournful interest. It was not in such a place that Gertrude would feel at home. Her tastes were simplicity herself, and she never had possessed any cravings after a fine house or costly furniture, yet here the greatest magnificence was about her in profusion. Verily, fickle indeed are the ways of Fortune. Very shortly tea was brought in and while the ladies were enjoying it they were disturbed by the rattle of wheels on the avenue. Caroline rose rather hastily and went to one of the long windows, not doubting that it would be the party returning from Wilderhaugh. But it was only a hired conveyance from the County Hotel, wherein sat a lady and gentleman, surrounded by quite a pile of luggage.

'Visitors!' exclaimed Mrs. Mayne. 'Unexpected, surely, or they would never have all gone away. But perhaps they are new servants. The lady is a very plain, dowdy sort of person.'

'I hardly think they are servants, mamma,' said Caroline. 'And the lady is certainly not plain in appearance, whatever

her dress may be. Come back from the window now, mother, and let us be going.'

At that moment, however, a servant knocked, and then entered the room.

'The Earl and Countess of Leybourne have arrived unexpectedly, Miss Franklin-Mayne,' she said, addressing her remarks to Caroline. 'Will you kindly come down-stairs and receive them?'

Caroline looked rather embarrassed, and wished with all her heart that they had driven away without seeking entrance to Castle Lundie. But her natural self-possession and lady-like ease were speedily restored, and both ladies at once went down-stairs. They found the young Countess standing in the hall, giving some directions to her maid, but at the advance of the ladies she turned quickly a smiling, radiant face towards them.

'This is not Gertrude?' she said quickly.

Caroline smiled. It was impossible to resist that winning and exquisite grace which in times gone had made Eleanor Lundie almost worshipped in Rumford.

'Oh no, Lady Leybourne; I am Lady Lundie's sister. This is my mother,' Caroline hastened to explain. 'It is unfortunate that you have arrived to find a deserted house.'

'Oh, that is nothing!' laughed Lady Leybourne. 'We intended it for a surprise visit. They fancy us in Spain, you know. And of course I am quite at home here. Are you just going? You are not staying at the Castle at present, then?'

'Oh no; we simply came to call,' answered Caroline. 'Good afternoon, Lady Leybourne. Mamma, I see the ponies are very restive.'

'Good afternoon. We will probably meet again, as the Earl and I are going to make a stay here. I don't know where he has gone, but you will see him again. Good-bye.'

She shook hands cordially with them both, and then ran lightly up-stairs.

'Now, that's a lady, Caroline!' said Mrs. Mayne, who was radiant with satisfaction. 'Now, you see, if we had gone home, as you wished, without going in, you would have missed that pleasure. Can it be possible that she and Elizabeth Lundie are sisters?'

'They are very unlike,' said Caroline softly, for her heart had warmed strangely towards the bright, frank young creature, whose very presence was like the shining of the sun.

'How plainly she is dressed, yet how unmistakeably aristocratic,' said Mrs. Mayne, forgetting that not ten minutes ago she had mistaken the Countess Leybourne for a servant. 'Really, she is thoroughly charming.'

Meanwhile the subject of their conversation had taken possession of her old rooms in the Castle, and was exploring every corner with affectionate eyes. When her husband joined her, she danced up to him and folded her hand gleefully on his arm.

'How delicious to arrive like this, isn't it, Wilfred?' she asked gaily. 'It is just like coming to an empty house to spend one's honeymoon, isn't it? Did you see Lady Lundie's mother and sister as they passed out?'

'No, my darling; were they here?'

'Yes; the sister is a most lovely creature. If Lady Lundie is at all like her she will eclipse us all. Did you hear they were all at Wilderhaugh? I wonder William cared to introduce his wife to Lady Devanha.'

'He had always an admiration for her, Eleanor,' said the Earl. 'But I should say she would not be the best of companions for one so young as your sister-in-law.'

Unconscious of the arrival of visitors at the Castle, Lady Lundie and her sister-in-law, with other guests, were whiling away the afternoon in the drawing-room at Wilderhaugh, and to one at least of the company that enforced idleness was a very weariness. There were half-a-dozen ladies, for Mrs. Tremaine, a fashionable widow and a dear friend of Lady Devanha's, had arrived also unexpectedly the previous day. The Trevors were amiable enough girls, but as frivolous and foolish as they could well be, and they hung with admiration upon every look and word of their cousin's wife. Evidently she was to them a model of what they one day hoped to become.

The conversation was frivolous, and sometimes worse. Lady Devanha seemed conversant with every fault and failing of each individual in her very wide circle of acquaintances, and if there was any skeleton on the hearth, any doubtful or

unpleasant circumstances connected with family life, it was upon these she loved to dwell. She related minutely to her listeners a detailed account of certain disagreements between a married pair of her acquaintance, which arose from the dissipated habits of the husband.

‘Poor dear creature, she is heartbroken with him!’ she said, and though the words implied compassion, there was none in her heart. ‘She is one of these sweet, angelic, trusting creatures who expected that after marriage her husband would be devoted to her. I told her not long ago that she would need to soar to a higher sphere ere she could hope to realize such Utopian ideas of bliss.’

Lady Lundie rose, and, walking slowly over to the open window, stepped out upon the terrace. The tone of the conversation had jarred upon her from the outset, but when Lady Devanha talked in such a flippant and scornful way of the sacred relationship of life, it was more than the gentle spirit could bear unmoved. She saw no reason why she should not mark her disapproval. To her mind it could be no breach of politeness to leave a room, if what was being said there insulted the highest and best feelings of her heart. Lady Devanha smiled slightly, exchanged glances with Miss Lundie, and resumed her recital.

Lady Lundie wrapped her summer shawl about her head, and wandered from the terrace at length, crossing the park to get a nearer glimpse of the wide and swift-rolling river, which made the chief beauty of the Earl of Devanha’s Border home. Before, however, she reached the other side of the park, the sound of voices and the barking of dogs betokened the approach of the sportsmen. And presently they emerged from a thick copse not many yards from where she had passed, and it was impossible for her to retire without being seen. The gentlemen looked surprised to see Lady Lundie there alone, and Sir William, readily surmising the cause, looked at her with darkening brow.

‘What are you doing here alone?’ he asked, in a low voice, when he reached her side.

‘I only came out to the terrace for a few minutes, William, and the gleaming of the river tempted me to a nearer view,’ she answered timidly.

'Where are the other ladies?'

'In the drawing-room.'

'Did it not strike you that it was rude, and absurd as well, to leave them and wander about here alone?'

She was silent. The fair head with its graceful wrap was turned away from him; but the heightened colour, the look of pain, were not unobserved by the others, and confirmed their opinion that Lundie and his wife were not a well-matched pair.

'You ought to have left me at home, William, as I desired,' she said at length. 'I am not fit to come among your friends. I am not of their order.'

'You do your utmost to convince me of that, Lady Lundie,' he said, in tones which she knew conveyed his deepest displeasure, and he spoke no other word to her either there or on their way home.

'I have again shocked your wife's fastidious taste; am I not a reprobate, Sir William?' quried Lady Devanha, with her most bewitching smile, as she handed him his tea. 'And yet I cannot for the life of me think *how* I have done it. Elizabeth says I uttered nothing out of the way'—

'My wife is a spoiled child, who apparently was too early released from the discipline of the schoolroom. As such pray judge and forgive her, Sophia,' said Sir William, and she knew of yore that his expression and tone indicated deep displeasure.

'I fear you have sold your liberty too dearly,' she whispered. 'There are other things more desirable in a wife than extreme youth and unsophisticated innocence.'

'You are right, Sophia,' he said moodily, and glanced towards the slight, insignificant figure, sitting alone in a neglected corner, with a forlorn and miserable look on her face. Then he looked at the brilliant and queenly woman by his side. Verily there was a wide, and to him a painful, contrast between them. Ay, poor Gertrude. Her untutored, girlish heart did not know how to keep the too fleeting love she had won. She did not know that a wound to her husband's pride sank deep, and left a sharper sting than a wound to his heart. Verily their union was the bitterest mistake of their lives. It was with an unutterable sense of relief that Lady

Lundie heard her husband at length say it was time for them to go home. For the first time in her life she was thankful for Elizabeth's presence with them in the waggonette; it prevented any private talk between them.

When they swept round to the front of the Castle, they were somewhat surprised to see a gentleman pacing leisurely up and down the terrace, smoking a cigar.

'There is Wilfred, or Wilfred's ghost, William!' exclaimed Miss Lundie, in tones of consternation. 'No, it is himself! How on earth did he manage to come here?'

The Earl came forward smiling, and raised his cap from his curly hair. He looked young, almost boyish, but his was a truly pleasant face—open, honest, and true, like the heart which beat within.

'Leybourne! In the name of all that's wonderful!' exclaimed Sir William, springing out almost before the trap had stopped. 'How and when did you come? and where is Eleanor?'

'She is here. We came a couple of hours ago by rail from Edinburgh, and thence by fly,' smiled the Earl, as he shook hands. 'Is this your wife, William?'

'This is my wife, Gertrude; Lord Leybourne, my sister's husband,' said Sir William.

Gertrude looked rather timidly at the stranger, and then, as his kindly words of greeting fell upon her ear, she uplifted grateful, speaking eyes to his face. Wilfred Leybourne did not like that look; it was too full of pathos, of wistfulness, and seemed to tell of heartache within.

'My wife's curiosity would no longer be denied,' he said laughingly. 'Though she was too ill to come to your wedding, Lady Lundie, she risked a journey to Scotland to see you, against the express desire of my physician. But a wilful woman must have her way.'

'I am glad you have come, Lord Leybourne,' said Gertrude simply, but he felt that the words were sincere.

She stole away into the house then, leaving the others chatting for a few minutes on the terrace. She wanted to be alone, for there was a surging wave of pent-up feeling which must have vent.

She had scarcely shut her dressing-room door when there

came an impatient tap to it, and a sweet, ringing voice craved admittance. She rose and opened it, to see upon the threshold a slim, fragile figure in a blue dressing-gown; a sweet, fair face, somewhat pale and worn by recent illness, lit by tender violet eyes, and made eloquent by the smile which curved a lovely mouth.

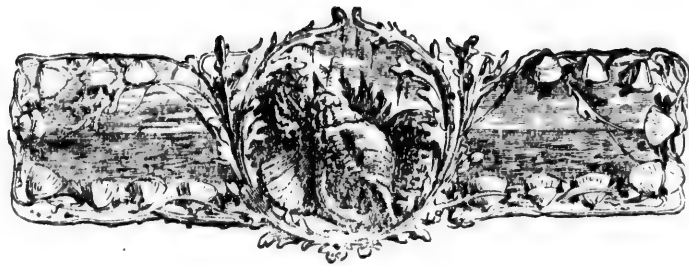
'Gertrude, I am Eleanor, your sister,' she said tremulously, and, entering the room, shut the door.

Then these two, both young wives, but of experience how widely different, looked for a moment at each other in absolute silence.

'I came to love you, and I know I shall,' said Eleanor Leybourne's sweet caressing voice. 'How very fair you are, and how pretty, but oh, how very, very young!'

She wound one fair arm about the drooping shoulders of her brother's wife, and drew her very close to her. It needed no second glance at that sweet face to tell Eleanor Leybourne that there was a sorrow in the heart. Gertrude bowed her head on the protecting arm, and burst into tears.





CHAPTER VII.

BEARING THE CROSS.

THE visit of the Earl and Countess of Leybourne to Castle Lundie was a gleam of sunshine indeed to the heart of Sir William's wife. She was at home with them; nay, more, during the three weeks they abode in Scotland her heart became knit to Eleanor Leybourne in the bonds of no ordinary affection. They resembled each other in many things; the same unselfish spirit, the same delicate consideration for others, was the mainspring of their actions. In her after life Gertrude Lundie never recalled these peaceful autumn days but with lingering and tender pleasure. Eleanor's presence in the house seemed to still all discord, to smooth away all unpleasantness, and to strew the sunshine of peace upon the hearts of its inmates. It even softened Sir William's sternness of demeanour, and his sister's warmly expressed admiration and growing attachment to his wife gratified him not a little. It was widely different from Elizabeth's cold criticism, from the half scornful smile and expressive shrug of the shoulders which were at times her comment upon her sister-in-law's actions.

But it came to an end. Early in September the visitors took their departure for their own home in Buckinghamshire, where, in a few months' time, was expected the advent of a son and heir to the dukedom of St. Roque. Gertrude bade them farewell with sorrow and a little envy of heart. Their

great love and perfect trust in each other had often made her heart ache, because in contrast her own married life seemed a barren, unsatisfying, miserable thing. Yet the blame did not lie with her; she did her best, and if the natural impulses of her heart did not often find vent, it was because they were held in curb by her husband's stern coldness of demeanour.

'You have married a dear and precious wife, William,' said Lady Leybourne to her brother as she bade him farewell. 'See to it that you be good to her—that you are worthy of her love.'

'Have you found me amiss in my treatment of my wife, Eleanor, that you thus admonish me?' he asked, with a slight smile.

'At times I have fancied you might be gentler with her, William,' she said seriously. 'Remember, she is very young, and that she needs all your care.'

'It may not be so necessary to her as you imagine, Eleanor,' he said, and these words troubled Lady Leybourne for days to come.

During the visit of the Earl and Countess there had been very few comings and goings between Wilderhaugh and Castle Lundie. Sophia Devanha had no liking for Lady Leybourne, and felt thoroughly uncomfortable in her presence. This was not to be wondered at, seeing the one was the exact antipodes of the other. But immediately the visitors left the Castle the intimacy was resumed, and then Gertrude Lundie was called upon to bear that bitterest of all humiliations which can burden the heart of a wife—she saw her husband prefer another woman's society before hers. Sir William Lundie and Lady Devanha were seldom apart. After a long interval, he returned with zest to his old pastime of playing with forbidden fruit, coquetting with a beautiful and fascinating woman. To Sophia Devanha this flirtation afforded a very agreeable variety to the monotonous dulness of life at a country house; it delighted her to find she could charm William Lundie still, for there had been a very serious flirtation between them in Calcutta; and, though she had thrown him over for a coronet, what poor love she was capable of had been bestowed upon Sir William. There was another reason, too, why she found her conquest so sweet; it was a revenge upon

Lady Lundie for the many unstudied but keen slights that insignificant girl had put upon her. Sophia Devanha's nature was essentially mean, as well as unwomanly, and she never felt shame or regret for an unkind or ungenerous action. The Earl looked on in placid amusement. He was the soul of easy good-nature, and his faith in his wife was only equalled by his boundless love for her. She had him completely in her thrall, and was absolute mistress; her word was law to him at all times, and, upon the rare occasions when she had vexed or displeased him, a sweet word or caress was sufficient to drive the cloud from his brow. Gertrude, looking on, also saw her husband gradually drifting further and further from her. She was too proud, however, to show that she saw it, only her reserve increased, the still grief grew upon her day by day; she never by word or look betrayed that the attention her husband paid to Lady Devanha disturbed her in the least. Sir William, noting that, attributed it to her absolute indifference to him, and in his anger redoubled his attentions to the beautiful, sweet-voiced siren, who had been notorious for her love affairs in the Indian capital before her marriage.

Elizabeth Lundie at times felt rather annoyed at her brother—not, however, on Gertrude's account, but because she dreaded that they might become the town talk of Rumford, which would indeed be a great humiliation for Castle Lundie.

Early in October, somewhat to Miss Lundie's relief, the Devanhas departed from Wilderhaugh to their place in Surrey. It was more than a relief to Gertrude—it was as if the sun shone after days of darkness and cloud.

'I don't know what we will do without them, Gertrude,' Sir William said to her one day. 'Life is unbearable without society.'

She was silent, and he looked at her keenly.

'You cannot expect me to express regret that we are again left alone,' she said quietly.

'Why not? I am sure Lady Devanha has been most delightful company for you. Without her Castle Lundie would have been insufferably dull.'

For the first time since their marriage Sir William saw his wife's lip curl in scorn.

'It is not pleasant for any woman to see her husband

making himself conspicuous by his attention to the wife of another man,' she said coldly, marvelling a little at her own temerity.

'When a man sees nothing but indifference, and something worse, in his own wife, he is glad to turn anywhere for relief,' he said. 'If there has been anything in my behaviour to displease you, Lady Lundie, you have yourself alone to thank.'

Her face flushed, and her hands trembled. Perhaps he was right, and she had failed in her duty as a wife.

She rose and timidly laid her hand on his arm.

'William,' she said pleadingly, 'you remember you promised to bear with me when I failed in some things you might expect of me. I have tried very hard to fill my place, to be a good and true wife to you, but somehow it has been harder than I thought. I do not know how it is, but I seem to have missed the way.'

The pathetic humbleness with which she spoke might have moved him to compassion, but the siren had dropped poison into his ears—had turned him against his girl-wife by pointing out plainly the reasons why she married him, and by hinting that some early attachment alone could account for her absolute indifference to him.

'If you would only help me a little. If you would love me as you used to do, I am sure we could be happy yet,' she continued earnestly. 'When that woman was here, when I saw your devotion to her, my heart seemed turned to stone, and I could not speak a word to you. But now she is gone, perhaps you will come back to me, and help me to try and be a better wife. Indeed, I am earnest and serious in what I say.'

Not a word of reproach, only a humble and unselfish confession of her own shortcomings! It was a wonder the man's heart was not smitten with a fierce remorse. But he only turned coldly away.

'I have made no complaint, Gertrude; your duties as mistress of Castle Lundie have been performed as well—better than I could expect. Perhaps I have no right to demand more at your hands.'

She also turned away, frozen to the heart. He did not see the grey shadow creeping up over that wan face, telling of hopeless desolation of soul.

'You will need to begin preparations shortly for our departure to Hertfordshire,' he said presently. 'It has always been our custom to spend Christmas at Stoke Abbey, and I should like to be settled there not later than the end of November.'

'I expected that we would spend Christmas here this year,' she said quietly. 'But I will see that your wishes are carried out.'

The next few weeks were busy with preparations for the impending change, and Lady Lundie seldom left the Castle. She was afraid to go to the town, for she fancied that all the world knew and talked of her unhappy marriage. There were not wanting those who attributed her pale and worn look to that cause, but as yet the differences between Sir William and his wife were not, as Miss Lundie feared, the town talk of Rumford. Lady Lundie seemed cut off entirely from her own relatives. They had spent the month of September at an English watering-place, and had lingered two weeks in London among old friends, so that they arrived home in the last week of October, to hear that Castle Lundie was soon to be shut up, as its inmates were to spend Christmas in the south. Hearing of their return to Meadowflats, Lady Lundie drove over in her own phaeton one afternoon and spent an hour with her mother and sister. Both expressed concern at her appearance, but it was only Caroline who could read below the surface, and guess that it was not physical suffering that had wrought the change. She came out of doors with her sister, and when she stepped into the phaeton she laid her hand on hers and looked beseechingly into her face.

'Gertrude, you are not well, my darling. Tell me what it is,' she said anxiously. 'Ought you not to see Doctor Dunsyre before you leave? You used to think he did you good.'

A wan smile touched for a moment Lady Lundie's lips.

'My disease can only be cured by the Great Physician when in His mercy He calls me to Himself, Caroline,' she said, with a strange, impressive solemnity which almost made Caroline shiver. 'I sometimes think it will not be long.'

'Hush, dear; surely it cannot be so bad as that. Are you not happy at Castle Lundie?'

'Knowing what you know, Caroline, why ask such a

question?' she said, not impatiently, but with a strange, sad wonder. 'Mine is the misery of an unblessed, loveless wifehood, and there is no sorrow greater on earth.'

What could Caroline say? What words of comfort could she offer? None—none.

'I dare not ask you to forgive me for my part in it, Gertrude. It is my reproach night and day. But I did it for the best.'

'Yes, I know. The blame lies with none except myself. I am but bearing the punishment for being false to the first and best impulses of my heart,' she said. 'Well, good-bye, Caroline. Perhaps we may not meet again until we return next summer. We go direct to London from Stoke Abbey, I believe, and I am to be presented at Court. What a mockery, is it not? I wish I could see you oftener, but you see I cannot ask who I please to my own home.'

Caroline said nothing, but her heart overflowed with an infinite compassion, with an agony of unavailing regret. Oh that the bitter past could be recalled!

They kissed each other then, and in silence parted. Lady Lundie drove into the town, and, as if possessed of some strange impulse, turned her ponies' heads up the Watergate, and drew rein at Katie Ruthven's door. She had only once seen the invalid girl since her marriage, and somehow she felt a desire to bid her good-bye before she left Scotland. There was a strange conviction in Lady Lundie's mind, born, I doubt not, of her indifferent health and depressed mental state, that she should never return to Castle Lundie. Katie Ruthven was able to be up now, sitting at the cosy kitchen fireside with her knitting in her hands. She looked surprised and greatly delighted to see Lady Lundie.

'No, thank you, Katie, I will not sit down. You see dusk is beginning to fall already, and I am driving alone,' said Lady Lundie, when the girl begged her to take a chair. 'We are going away from Castle Lundie for some months, and I could not go without bidding you good-bye.'

'Thank ye, my leddy; but are ye no' weel? I never saw siccan a change on ye,' said Katie, in concern.

'Oh, I am quite well, Katie, though not so well as I was. Perhaps it will be my turn to bear pain; yours is rapidly passing away, I am truly glad to see.'

'Ay, mem, an' I'll be a' richt sune. Maister John's gien mother the north lodge at Redlands, and we're to flit at the term. Isn't that guid?'

'Very good, Katie. The fresh breezes at Redlands will surely complete your cure. Well, good-bye, my girl, and though I am away do not quite forget me,' said Lady Lundie kindly. 'I like to be remembered by old friends.'

As she shook hands she slipped a sovereign into the girl's hand.

'To assist in beautifying the new home, Kitty,' she said, with a smile, and to avoid the girl's grateful thanks she left the house. As she drove rapidly out of the town she saw in the distance a figure she knew well. It was John Strathearn walking home after his day's work was done. Very speedily the fast-trotting ponies overtook him. He turned his head, and, recognising Lady Lundie, courteously raised his hat and stood aside to let the phaeton pass. But, to his astonishment, she drew rein, and, leaning out of the carriage, extended her hand. He was obliged to take it, and again, as of yore, that gentle touch thrilled him through and through.

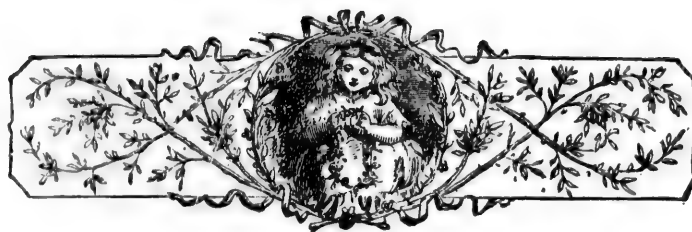
'We are going away from the Castle, Mr. Strathearn, and I thought I would like to say good-bye,' she said, in the same simple, girlish way, and without the slightest embarrassment of look or tone. 'Is your father well?'

'Not so well as I could wish, Lady Lundie,' John answered, his compassionate eyes noting the great and woful change on the sweet face which was still the dearest on earth to him.

'Ah, that is bad; but we have all our troubles, sent, I suppose, to wean us away from earth,' she said. 'Mr. Strathearn, good-bye.'

'Good-bye, and God bless you, Lady Lundie,' said John hoarsely, and with simple and manly reverence he touched with his lips the offered hand he held, and turned to go.

She knew what that action meant; it told her that she was still the woman among women to him, the one he revered above all others. And somehow that inner consciousness made Gertrude Lundie's cross less hard to bear.



CHAPTER VIII.

FIRM.

STOKE ABBEY excelled Castle Lundie in beauty of situation, quaintness of style, and richness of associations with the past. When Lady Lundie saw the venerable pile in the grey and shadowy light of a November afternoon, she was conscious of a strange thrill of interest and pride. The remains of the old abbey still stood, a grey and picturesque ruin of boundless and enchanting interest to the lovers of antiquity, who in the absence of the family were permitted to enter the grounds. The more modern part of the building was a faithful copy of the old style, and, as it too was growing grey with the storms of many winters, it was not in any way out of keeping with the ruins. It was a comfortable and luxurious residence within, and, if the rooms lacked something of the lofty magnificence which characterized the interior of Castle Lundie, it was none the less pleasant on that account to the young wife, who saw it now for the first time. Like Castle Lundie, it was completely shut in by wide-spreading and venerable trees, and, as it was built in a hollow, there was no view of the surrounding country obtainable even from the highest windows.

It was some years since Stoke Abbey had been occupied by the family, and it may readily be surmised that the arrival of the lord of the manor with a fair young wife was anticipated with eager interest by the inhabitants of Grey Stoke. Sir

William Lundie found himself a stranger almost on these English lands, so many years had elapsed since he had visited them in person. But during his long absence his affairs had been in the hands of a just and prudent steward, who was ready to render account to his lord even of the uttermost farthing. Sir William Lundie was a good master in so far as he never interfered in the smallest degree with his dependents, but, on the other hand, he had not the slightest interest either in his tenants or in the servants of his own household. He regarded the tenants merely as the tillers of his soil, for the privilege of which they paid into his treasury yearly a certain sum. All matters of improvements, every complaint, was laid before the steward; only a few of the old tenants remembered even having seen their landlord.

His dependents Sir William regarded as automaton to perform the duties necessary for his comfort, that was all. Little wonder, then, that no bond of love or friendly unity bound them to their lord.

The weather being mild and pleasant during the early days of December, Lady Lundie spent much of her time out of doors, and before she had been a week in her English home she was more familiar with its surroundings than Elizabeth Lundie herself. The villagers noted with some wonder how very frequently Lady Lundie drove out alone. It was rare indeed that either her husband or her sister accompanied her in her long and solitary drives. She often drew rein in Grey Stoke to speak a kindly word to a woman at a door, or to pat some curly-headed, dirty-faced urchin, standing in open-mouthed wonder at sight of the grand lady from the Abbey. She also called at the Vicarage, and obtained from the Vicar's wife all needful information about the deserving poor in Grey Stoke, whose wants she immediately planned to relieve. It was work after her own heart, and, as she had plenty of means at her disposal,—for Sir William did not grudge her a liberal allowance,—she found wide scope for all her generous impulses. In such things Lady Lundie interested herself, with such duties filled up the measure of her days. And so December wore away, and Christmas was close at hand.

One morning, when she went into the conservatory to cut some flowers, her husband joined her there. She knew at

once he had something to say to her, and she laid down her basket and scissors, and turned an expectant face to him. The change of scene had evidently done her good, for the wan and haggard look had gone from her face, and something of the old girlish bloom had stolen again unawares to her cheek. Although she had no great happiness, her life was more peaceful here, and of late she seemed to have succeeded in pleasing her husband better.

‘I have been talking to Elizabeth about visitors for Christmas, Gertrude,’ he said quietly. ‘It is right that we should keep Christmas royally here, and as we cannot well do so alone, I should like you to send invitations to-day. You see this is the twelfth. The time is short enough.’

‘Very well, William. If you will tell me whom you would like, I can write to-day,’ she answered readily enough.

‘There is no necessity for asking a great number, Gertrude, for in a crowd there is no real enjoyment,’ he continued. ‘My sister and I have made out a list. There it is.’

She did not think of resenting his action in consulting Elizabeth before her—such trifles had long since ceased to annoy her. So, when we are called upon to endure great sorrows, we pass by lesser ones unmoved. She took the paper from his hand, and he watched her keenly while she ran her eye over it. He saw the quick colour leap to her cheeks, the flashing of the eye, which he had learned to know and understand. She took up the dainty gold pencil suspended to her watch chain, drew it through the last name on the paper, returned it to him, and, lifting up her basket, she turned her back on him, and calmly went on with her work. It was a daring thing to do; probably, if she had thought a moment, she would have hesitated, but she acted upon her first and truest impulse. Her husband spoke no more then, but turned upon his heel and left the place.

She did not see him alone again until she was in her dressing-room before dinner. He came in abruptly, dismissed Clare just as she had turned to go of her own accord, and, looking straight at his wife, asked her one brief question.

‘Have you written these invitations?’

‘Not yet,’ she answered, playing nervously with the pendant she had been about to clasp about her neck.

'Come down to the drawing-room now, then. There is half an hour before dinner ; ample time to write the more important ones,' he said curtly, and she at once clasped on her ornaments, and turned to accompany him.

In obedience to his request she seated herself at a davenport, and took the pen in her unsteady fingers.

He laid the list before her, and told her in what terms to couch her invitations. She wrote with rapidity and ease, and in a quarter of an hour five dainty little epistles lay addressed and sealed beside her.

'Now Lady Devanha's, if you please,' he said quietly, and keeping his dark eyes fixed mercilessly on her face.

Up over neck, and cheek, and brow swept the red flush of wounded, wifely pride. She laid down the pen, turned her head, and looked her husband straight in the face.

'Will you insist upon Lady Devanha coming here after what I have said, William?' she asked.

'What was it you said?' he asked somewhat mockingly. 'Did you bring forward even the shadow of a reason why Lady Devanha should not be numbered among my guests?'

'They are my guests as well, William. As your wife, I have a right surely to exercise some control over the hospitalities of the house. If you love me it would be sufficient for you that Lady Devanha's presence was distasteful to me,' she said slowly.

'You have no rights divided from mine. I cannot, for a whim of your jealous fancy, break the bonds of an old friendship,' he said coldly. 'Be good enough to finish the list.'

'I will *not*, William. Her presence here will be an insult to me. She has already humbled me openly with your devotion to her. She shall *not* come here with my consent,' said Lady Lundie, speaking without passion, but with a strange and resolute calm. She rose as she spoke, and stood before her husband, fearless, because she had right upon her side. His face grew pale, almost livid, with suppressed passion. To a man who had never brooked contradiction this open defiance in a woman was not pleasant to bear.

'So, Lady Lundie, you refuse to obey me in so small a matter as this?' he said slowly. 'A pretty specimen of wifely duty, wifely love, you exhibit to me to-day. Where are your

promises, made in tears to me, your anxiety to fill worthily the high position to which I, in a moment of passion, foolishly raised you ?'

'Did you not also promise to be true to me, William ?' asked Lady Lundie, lifting sad, pathetic eyes to his angry face. 'God knows I have tried to do my duty, to keep in the spirit and in the letter my marriage vows. Were I not still anxious to do so, would I feel so deeply in a matter like this? It is because I am your true and faithful wife that I rebel against this woman entering our home. She is a thousand times more beautiful and fascinating than I, and she has already poisoned your heart against me. She is not a good woman, because she is not true in thought or in action to her own kind and generous husband. Oh, William, if any shadow of your early love for me remains, grant me this request, and keep Sophia Devanha far away from us and our home. She has come too miserably between us already.'

'You ask an impossibility,' he said coldly. 'I have already passed my word that they shall spend Christmas here. On that account they have set aside all other invitations, and only await a communication from you to join us.'

The wife's pale lip quivered.

'Then they must wait in vain. Since you have not sufficient respect for me to screen me from being pitied and mocked at by the world as a despised wife, I must stand alone,' she said quietly, and without waiting to hear him speak again she quitted the room. On her way up-stairs she met Miss Lundie, who looked almost startled to see her.

'What is the matter with you, Gertrude ?' she asked.

'Matter ?—nothing,' answered Gertrude vaguely. 'Will you come to my dressing-room a moment, Elizabeth? I want to speak to you.'

In some astonishment Miss Lundie followed her sister-in-law along the corridor, and entered the room with her. Then Gertrude turned swiftly, and laid her hand on her arm.

'Elizabeth, I have had some words with William about Lady Devanha. He wishes her to come here for Christmas, and I object—you must know well enough on what grounds,' she said quickly. 'I have not asked many things from you, Elizabeth. Will you help me with this?'

'Really, Gertrude, you ask an almost impossible thing. I have no business to dictate to William about his visitors.'

'You have influence with him, greater, I believe, than mine. I only ask you to use it on my behalf. Try to persuade him that it would be better for us all if they did not come,' said Gertrude pleadingly.

Miss Lundie shook her head.

'I daren't, Gertrude. I have known William longer than you, and I have proved by experience that to live comfortably with him you must give him all his own way,' she said. 'Don't lay things so to heart. Laugh at them. It is quite common in society for husbands to flirt harmlessly with other women. Take my advice and don't let it trouble you. The affair will die a natural death.'

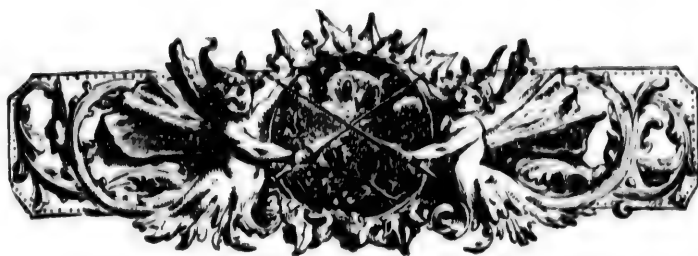
Lady Lundie smiled a strange, sad smile, and her hand dropped from her sister-in-law's arm.

'You are a woman, Elizabeth, and, although you have never been a wife, I might expect you to have a little sympathy for me. You were a daily witness to the humiliations Sophia Devanha heaped upon me at Castle Lundie. You saw her proud and mocking appropriation of my husband's attentions and society, and yet you bid me not trouble my head about it! I wish I could do as you say, but it is impossible. Will you kindly say to William I am too ill to come down-stairs to-night? Indeed I could not comport myself properly before the servants.'

Miss Lundie, in a slightly uncomfortable frame of mind, departed down-stairs.

Lady Lundie shut her dressing-room door and turned the key in the lock.





CHAPTER IX.

LETTERS.

WE need not wait, William. Your wife will not be down to dinner,' said Miss Lundie, when she entered the drawing-room.

'Have you seen her?' asked Sir William.

'Yes, and she is in a highly nervous and excited state. She told me she had some words with you. I hope you were not too hard upon her.'

'Did she tell you her absurd objections to the Devanhas coming here?'

'Yes. I warned you of it before, William. Delightful as Sophia's society is, perhaps you would have been better to dispense with it for a time at least. There will be no pleasure if Gertrude remains in her present frame of mind. Indeed, it is probable some unpleasantness may occur. She can be firm enough when she likes, and her feelings appear to be deeply hurt.'

'Her jealousy is aroused, you should say,' corrected Sir William. 'Yes, Elizabeth, you are right; she can be firm enough—obstinate, in fact. The question is, which is to win—she or I?'

'I am afraid you are beginning to discover that your hasty marriage was an imprudent step,' Miss Lundie ventured to say.

'I am not prepared to admit that yet. Gertrude is charm-

ing and loveable when she likes, but she is crotchety. I am not without hopes that a season in London will soften down these small asperities. She is too outspoken, too painfully candid for the times in which she lives.'

'And for the husband to whom she is bound,' supplemented Elizabeth drily. 'But really, William, are you going to insist upon Sophia and Eric coming just now?'

'Yes; you know I have already asked them, and Gertrude must be taught that *I* am to be absolute,' said Sir William. 'If she continues to refuse to write to Lady Devanha, you must do it, Elizabeth, and say Gertrude is indisposed, or anything for an excuse. You can easily make it all right in Devanha's eyes. Sophia herself is not very particular regarding the minor points of etiquette.'

Miss Lundie was silent a moment. Although it would not be politic to refuse her brother's request, there was a lingering feeling in her heart, a strange compassion for the poor young wife up-stairs. She felt that she would rather not be disloyal to her if she could avoid it, but self-interest had all along guided Elizabeth Lundie's walk in life, and it was strong enough now to set aside any more generous impulse.

'I will do it on one condition, William: that you promise not to make yourself so conspicuous by your attention to Sophia. It really went too far at Castle Lundie, and I don't wonder Gertrude felt it. Many women would have openly rebelled against it, and shut the door upon Sophia. *I* would. If you promise me that, I will write to-night.'

'Gertrude has rebuked you, surely, with some of her prudish notions. What harm is there in an hour's coquetting with a pretty woman? It is permissible everywhere. But, to satisfy you, I will promise to be a good boy,' said Sir William, in a slightly mocking tone.

At that moment the gong sounded for the second time, conveying something of the butler's impatience in its tone.

'Lady Lundie is indisposed,' said Miss Lundie to that individual as she passed into the dining-room. 'She will not be down. See that something is sent up to her at once.'

But the servant who carried up the tray with a dainty little repast upon it could not obtain admittance, and Clare appeared at length to say that her ladyship desired nothing at present.

That evening Miss Lundie wrote two letters, both addressed to Lady Devanha, one intended for her husband's perusal and the other for her eyes alone. They were characteristic of the woman who wrote them, and clever enough in their way. The first one ran as follows:—

'STOKE ABBEY, GREY STOKE,
'December 12, 187-.

'MY DEAR SOPHIA,—As Lady Lundie is indisposed, and unable to issue her Christmas invitations herself, I am deputed to do it for her. We expect the Courtenays, Sir James and Lady Wyatt, Captain —— and his two daughters, and yourselves. They will all be here before the twentieth, and I write to see when we may expect Eric and you. I do not promise you any exciting gaiety, for, as you know, Lady Lundie's tastes are very quiet, and I fancy William and I are both past the gay age. But there will be the usual festive meetings, and, if the frost continue, the pond will be in splendid condition. You need not bring skates, as there are a dozen or more pairs lying in the green-room, which only require to be worn once to make them all that could be desired. Have you been very quiet at Treby Towers? I always think the weeks between the close of the shooting and Christmas the dullest in all the year. Write by return, if possible. Perhaps you had better address your reply to Lady Lundie, as this is only by proxy. With affectionate love to Devanha and yourself, I am yours sincerely,

'ELIZABETH VERE LUNDIE.'

The other was couched in less guarded and polite phrase, and began without date or heading of any kind:—

'DEAR SOPHIA,—Lady Lundie is in the dumps over your coming. William and she have had a small scene over it, but, as usual, he has come off victor. I write this privately to say that, if you come,—which, of course, you must and shall,—you must really not vex the poor little wife by keeping William dancing after you as you did in Scotland. I am really sorry for her; so would you be if you saw her. You can afford to be generous, and you can easily make your presence not only agreeable, but charming to her if you like.

Only leave William alone. I know you will take this in good part. I write this chiefly in the interests of peace, which I would preserve in the household as long as I possibly can. In strict confidence, I believe it is a clear case of marry in haste and repent at leisure with them both. Of course you understand not to let Eric see this, and, if you are what I take you for, you will be properly grateful to me for giving you this hint, and to show your gratitude you will grant my request.--Ever yours,

‘E. LUNDIE.’

These epistles, both enclosed in one envelope, arrived at Treby Towers on the second morning after they were written. The mail-bag was handed in to the morning-room just when the Earl and his wife had begun breakfast. As her husband was busy with his own letters, Lady Devanha had no difficulty whatever in slipping Elizabeth Lundie’s private enclosure unobserved into her pocket after she had given it a hasty perusal.

When the Earl had looked over his own correspondence, he raised his head and glanced inquiringly at his wife.

‘Well, Sophy, anything new?’

‘Nothing of consequence but that,’ she answered, tossing Miss Lundie’s letter across the table to him.

He read it over and laid it aside without comment.

‘Well?’ she said a little impatiently.

‘Well?’ he repeated, with a slight smile. ‘Are you particularly anxious to spend Christmas at Stoke Abbey?’

‘Why, of course! Didn’t we promise before we left Wilderhaugh that we would consider that a binding engagement?’

‘You did, Sophy. I don’t think I ever passed my word about it.’

‘Well, do you want to go, else when shall I write and refuse?’ she asked.

‘Not so fast, my dearest. I have a strange fancy that I would like to spend Christmas at home this year.’

‘At home!—here, at Treby Towers?’ she exclaimed, her beautiful face clouding.

‘Yes; why not? We could make it bearable enough, could we not?’

'Oh, I daresay. If I like to exert myself to fill the house with people, and then exhaust my strength contriving how they are to be amused. I need a rest, Eric; I feel quite worn out, and I was looking forward to the visit to Stoke Abbey with such pleasure.'

'Well, my love, we will go by all means; anything to please you,' he said, with his ready good-nature. 'I can't account for this odd disinclination to leave home at present. I never felt anything like it before.'

'Oh, you need a change. It will do you a world of good,' she said, her face beaming again; and as she rose to go to her escritoire, she laid one fair arm about her husband's neck and lightly kissed his brow. It was such winning and caressing ways which kept him so bound to her, and he believed in her faith and love as absolutely as in his own existence. In his eyes his wife was a pearl of great price.

Lady Devanha wrote a polite little note to Lady Lundie, couched in these terms:—

'TREBY TOWERS, *December 15.*

'MY DEAR LADY LUNDIE,—We will be charmed to accept your kind invitation to spend Christmas with you at The Abbey. I have often heard of it as a lovely old place, and I expect to be enchanted with it. I hope your indisposition is past. I am glad to say the Earl and I are in the best of health. He unites with me in thanks and kind regards to your family circle.—Believe me, dear Lady Lundie, most sincerely yours,

'SOPHIA DEVANHA.'

'P.S.—Particulars about day and hour of arrival will follow.

'S. D.'

That epistle, like Miss Lundie's, arrived at the breakfast hour. It was the sole communication addressed to Lady Lundie. Her mother and Caroline were her only correspondents, and they did not write very frequently.

Miss Lundie recognised the fantastic little envelope even before she caught sight of the coronet on the back of it, and something like a tremor shook her. If she could have framed an excuse, she would have left the room until the storm she

expected blew over. She was mistaken. Lady Lundie broke the seal, read the contents of the dainty, delicately-perfumed enclosure, and, laying it beside her plate, calmly went on with her breakfast. Even the expression on her face underwent no change.

'Who is your correspondent, Gertrude?' asked Sir William, when the meal was nearly ended.

For answer she passed him the letter, with slightly curling lip, and, rising, left the room.

She did not go up-stairs. She caught a fur mantle from the stand in the outer hall, wrapped it about her head and shoulders, and stepped out into the crisp, clear, frosty air. It was a lovely winter morning. The sky was clear and hard, and the sun shone brilliantly, causing the hoar-frost on the lawn and bare boughs of the trees to glitter like precious jewels. The earth was crisp and pleasant to the feet, the robins hopped here and there on the paths, chirping their cheery morning greeting. Lady Lundie heeded none of these things. She walked swiftly right through the cold, wet parks, careless that her feet were only protected by her thin home slippers. She was pursued by something to which she had been hitherto a stranger. She was brought face to face with that evil self which lurks in every human heart, waiting an opportunity to leap to the front. The old sunny-heartedness, the kindly, unselfish, Christian spirit which had been hitherto Gertrude Lundie's only knowledge of herself, seemed to have gone away from her for ever, and in its place had come a black and terrible spirit of anger and hatred, which made her afraid. She was no longer a girl, though at her age she might and ought to have been; but a beaten woman, driven to the utmost limit of her endurance. She walked on until she reached the ponds—two great sheets of water shut in by larch and pine, and entirely frozen over. In the morning sun the smooth ice glittered like burnished silver. It was a wild, lonely spot, and there Gertrude Lundie paused under a dark and gloomy pine, and tried to think over the tangled web of her life—tried to map out for herself a course of action. In the solitude and peace of that quiet spot gradually the tumults died away, and again tranquillity reigned in her poor riven heart.

Sir William Lundie, somewhat to his amazement, saw his wife seat herself at the luncheon table at the usual hour with as serene and unclouded a face as he could desire. Nor was she peculiar in her manner. She talked freely and kindly to them both, only the name of Lady Devanha or any allusion to her coming or to her letter never crossed her lips. Nor was it mentioned until two days before their arrival, when Sir William himself broached the subject.

'I hope you intend to be kind and courteous to the Devanhas, Gertrude,' he said rather uneasily, for he fancied his wife's silence ominous.

'I shall never forget that I am a lady, William,' she answered quietly, and somehow he dared say no more.

Evidently she had resolved to make the best of it, and Sir William inwardly respected her for her absolute self-control.

On the evening of the twentieth they arrived, in company with some other guests who had travelled by the same train. Lady Lundie's behaviour was the perfection of grace and lady-like self-possession. She touched Lady Devanha's hand, replied courteously to her effusive greetings, but she did not say what would have been so bitterly untrue, that she welcomed her gladly to Stoke Abbey.

Sir William, however, was satisfied, and yet, strange as it may seem, his wife had made him somewhat ashamed of himself. He had won, indeed, but his victory was scarcely worth boasting of, even to himself.

After breakfast next morning a skating party set out for the ponds, which were in splendid order. Lady Lundie accompanied them, and the Earl of Devanha put on her skates, and they set off for a run together. They had always been good friends, for, though Devanha possessed few of the higher gifts, he was honest and manly, and Lady Lundie respected him.

They got into an earnest discussion over the condition of the English peasantry, and Lady Lundie did not observe that they were nearing an unsafe part of the ice.

'We had better turn here, Lord Devanha,' she said, stopping abruptly. 'This end of the pond, for some reason or other, never freezes to any thickness, and is never safe. I spoke to Sir William about having a fence run across it, but he thought a warning would be sufficient.'

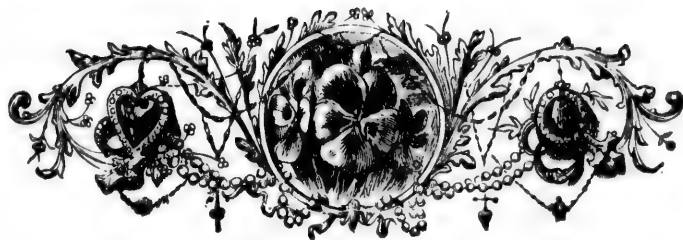
'How curious! That is quite a mystery,' exclaimed the Earl, with interest. 'It looks quite safe; as much so as the rest. I must have a nearer view. I'll go cautiously.'

'Pray don't, Lord Devanha. I assure you it is most dangerous,' said Lady Lundie nervously.

'Oh, nonsense! I'm off! It won't be any worse than a ducking at the most,' he cried daringly, and sped across to the forbidden space. Lady Lundie stood still in an agony of suspense, and then called to some of the others to join her. Just then she heard the fatal cracking of the ice, and the Earl went down. In a moment all ran to the rescue, and ropes were at once procured. But the greedy Black Pool had sucked its victim into its fatal depths, and search proved unavailing till it was too late. The ladies went back to the house, taking with them Lady Devanha, whose power of self-control deserted her in the hour of need. She simply went from one hysterical fit into another, and nothing would calm or appease her. Then it was that the true, calm, womanly nature of Gertrude Lundie exhibited itself. She seemed to be everywhere, giving orders, making preparations for the return of the others with the exhausted or lifeless Earl. The chill and wintry dusk was closing in before they came, bearing their sad burden with them.

All efforts were unavailing to restore animation to the lifeless form. Verily, in an hour's time the house of mirth was turned to a house of mourning; and poor Eric Devanha's presentiment that some evil awaited him away from his own house had found its most terrible fulfilment.





CHAPTER X.

FRIENDS FOR LIFE.

ANYTHING new in the paper this morning, John?' asked Mr. Strathearn, when he entered the breakfast-room on the morning of Christmas Day.

'Yes, father, there are two items of interest—one of which you will regret to hear,' answered John. 'The Earl of Devanha has been drowned while skating at Stoke Abbey.'

'Dear me! that is unfortunate. There is not sufficient care taken to see whether the ice is perfectly safe before people venture on it. But, for my part, I never could see what pleasure an able-bodied man could take in skating. It is a child's amusement. A game at curling is a very different thing now,' said the old man garrulously. 'Well, does it give any particulars?'

'No, it simply states the fact of the occurrence, and mentions the Earl's age, and some other things concerning him. He is only in his thirtieth year.'

'Ay, ay, a young man just your own age, lad; and he has a wife too, hasn't he? Any family?'

'No; the title passes to his brother Walter, who is a lieutenant in the Grenadiers,' answered John a little absently, for his mind was more occupied with the other item of interest contained in the morning paper.

'Grant Heatherlie has resigned his seat, dad,' he said

presently. 'So we will have the excitement of a county election about us shortly.'

'Eh, no, you don't say so!' exclaimed the old man, with an eager animation which made John smile.

He was a keen politician still, and he loved nothing better than to recall the stirring times of the Reform Bill agitation, in which he had taken a very active part.

'I wonder who'll stand! What's Grant Heatherlie's reason for his step?'

'Age and infirm health. I fancy the electors will be rather pleased. We have not been very ably represented for some years.'

'No. I wonder Heatherlie did not retire long ago. Who do you think a likely person to stand?'

'There is not a Liberal proprietor in the district, dad, except Colonel Graham and myself,' said John jocularly.

'Graham won't stand. He's a sportsman, and knows nothing about politics. Rather than see the seat in Tory hands again, John, you must stand yourself—eh, lad? How would you like to write M.P. after your name?'

'That is not of much consequence, dad, but I've had more than one thought about it lately, since I heard the first rumour of Heatherlie's probable resignation. Would you have any objections?'

'Are you in earnest, John?'

'Perfectly. If you would advise me to it, I would have no hesitation whatever in putting myself forward as a candidate.'

The old man looked in a surprised way at his son, and then slowly a glow of pride and exultation overspread his face, and he slapped his hands on his knees.

'Good! good! Advise you to it? Of course I will. You're the very man. You'll be sure to get in. You are everybody's body, as the saying goes; who could have a better chance? Eh, lad, what wouldn't I give to see you standing in the House thundering against the Government! I believe it would add ten years to my life.'

John laughed outright.

'Well, dad, we'll have a thought about it; and keep quiet in the meantime,' he said. 'I'll be off down to the town and

see what's what. There'll be some rumours afloat likely about Heatherlie's successor. I think I could lay my finger on the Conservative candidate, but I'll wait and see.'

'Is it Sir William Lundie? He is the most likely of all the county gentlemen. But is he a politician?'

'He is the man. I don't know anything about his politics, dad. We'll find that out when he appears in public. But I may be wrong. That is just a surmise of my own.'

'You are generally right,' said the old man. 'Ay, ay, lad, and nothing less than M.P. will content you? But I always thought it was in you.'

Again John laughed. It was long since he had seen his father roused to such interest, and he was glad of it, for of late he had noted with deep anxiety a strange listlessness and lack of spirit, which he feared might indicate the approach of the end. Perhaps there might be a grain of truth in his father's joke that to see him in Parliament would give him a new lease of life. It would rouse the sluggish energies, make a complete change in the too monotonous round of life, and give the quiet mind a fresh and stirring interest in the things affecting national life and prosperity. It might indeed be worth the trial.

In the course of the day John rode into Rumford. It was holiday time at the mills, where there would be nothing done now till the Monday after the New Year. But the young master had a key of the stable in his pocket, and, putting up his horse, he walked leisurely up the street and into the office of Mr. Kilgour, the lawyer. As he expected, he found a few of the leading townsmen there discussing the event of the day.

'Here's the very man we want,' said Kilgour, rubbing his hands together. 'Well, Mr. John, what do you think of the news this morning?'

'It was hardly a surprise,' answered John. 'And what are you all saying to it?'

'Saying to it? Why, that it's the best thing ever happened, and that it ought to have happened long ago,' said Mr. Lockhart, the banker, a puffy, self-satisfied old man. 'When a man can't keep up with the times, sir, it's a duty he owes to his fellow-men to retire from public life.'

'When old age begins to steal unawares upon ourselves, Mr. Lockhart,' said John, 'I question if any one of us will be found ready to admit that we are falling behind the age. We'll have a pretty strong contest this time, likely.'

'Yes, if we can get the candidates to come forward,' said the lawyer. 'We were just going over a few names before you came in, Mr. John. Perhaps you could suggest a likely person?'

'There is no lack of eligible enough Conservative men in the county, Kilgour,' said John, with a laugh.

'We know that, but we are ripe for a change, and we've come to the conclusion that *you* are the man.'

John's face flushed.

'I am very sensible of the honour, but there are others who can advance more powerful claims upon the county, Kilgour,' he said quietly.

'That may be; but if the seat is to be contested you are the man,' repeated the lawyer, while the others signified their approval with a sonorous 'Hear, hear.' 'You own considerable property in the county, you have the ability, and you have what is sometimes of more consequence in an election, the affections and respect of the entire community. Then you are a young man, possessed of unlimited means, and you have plenty of time at your disposal.'

'And what of the Earn Mills?' asked John, with a smile.

'The Earn Mills, my boy?' repeated the lawyer. 'Everybody knows they can carry on themselves, you have got the concern into such splendid working order. It's a duty you owe to your native town as well as to your party.'

'Well, well, I'll leave myself in your hands in the meantime,' said John good-humouredly. 'Has there been any movement in the Conservative interest yet?'

'We have not heard,' said the lawyer. 'That is a very sad affair about poor Lord Devanha at Stoke Abbey.'

'Very,' said John, and he knew at once that he was not alone in considering Sir William Lundie a likely person to be put forward by his party.

'We can wait a bit,' said Mr. Lockhart, 'and in the meantime we can be working quietly, you know. What does your father say to this new turn of affairs, Mr. John?'

'My father is as keen a politician as he was in the days when you and Kilgour and he were in the very heat of the Reform Bill excitement,' John answered, with a smile.

'Ay, ay, that makes us all old men. Eh, Kilgour?' said the banker.

'Well, I was seventy last November. What is your father's age?'

'Eighty-seven,' John answered. 'And I'm not sure but that he looks as young as either of you.'

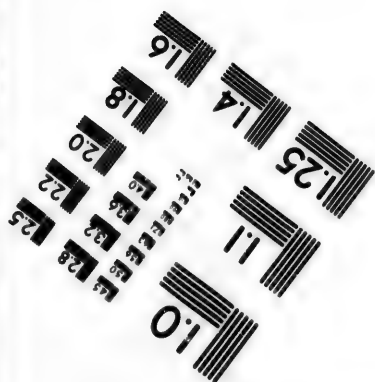
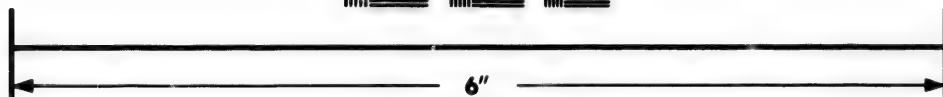
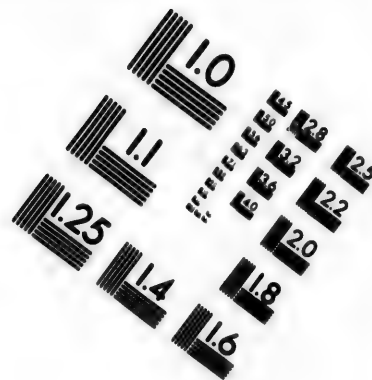
'He never had to work like me,' said the lawyer. 'Well, are you off, Mr. John? Tell your father Lockhart and I will be up one of these days to ask his consent to make his son our M.P.'

'All right; you'll find him quite of your mind,' laughed John. 'Good afternoon; I'll see you to-morrow.'

So saying he sauntered out of the office, and, by the force of a long habit, to seek David Dunsyre in any engrossing matter, he turned up the street towards his house. As usual his friend was out, but Miss Dunsyre was at home, would he step in? Sarah asked. John hesitated a moment, for he had never seen Margaret alone since that memorable, and to him painful, evening in October. He sauntered up to the drawing-room, but found it empty; however, he seated himself very contentedly in David's own chair, and took up the number of the *Lancet* which that gentleman had tossed aside when he was called out. But John was not deeply interested in matters medical, and he scanned with a languid and very absent sort of interest the first pages of a very scientific article on the germs of cholera. He had been thus engaged for about ten minutes when Margaret entered the room. She had been making her evening toilet, and, as she had come straight from her dressing-room, had not been made aware of the presence of a visitor in the drawing-room. Her fair pale face flushed deeply red, but she spoke with an admirable self-possession. How bitterly Margaret Dunsyre regretted the strange weakness which had betrayed her that October night, perhaps you may guess. She was a proud woman, and her pride had sustained the keenest of all humiliations which a woman can endure.

'John, how long have you been here? I did not hear you





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come in. Really Sarah presumes too much upon her own privileges and my indulgence ; she ought to have come to me at once.'

'Don't blame Sarah, Margaret. She has not been accustomed to observe ceremony with me,' said John, with his pleasant smile. 'I came seeking David, but as usual in vain. He does not bestow too much of his companionship on you.'

'No ; but I have grown accustomed, and ceased to expect it,' Margaret made answer. 'How does your father stand the cold weather?'

'Wonderfully, thank you,' answered John. 'David would be interested in the news this morning?'

'Yes ; he was wondering if you would be down. Have you heard of the honour they are talking of bestowing on you?'

'Yes ; it was of that I came to speak to David. They have extracted a half-promise from me that I will allow myself to be nominated. What do *you* think of it?'

Again Margaret's face faintly flushed. There was no difference in his demeanour to her—the same friendly, brotherly way ; the same old confidence seemed to be between them still. Not many men could have so bridged over and swept away the delicate barrier which that October night had for a little time raised between them.

'Oh, I am very pleased, and David is just wild with delight. I hope you will win,' she answered.

'Thanks ; I knew you would, Margaret,' John said a little quickly, and, rising, he began to pace restlessly to and fro the room.

Margaret knew of yore that something was troubling him—that something was coming. In old times she had often seen him thus when he came to her with all his troubles.

'Margaret, may I tell you something?' he asked suddenly. 'You always used to help and comfort me with your advice.'

'I am as ready, nay, readier than ever, John,' she said softly, and she raised true, earnest eyes to his face.

He did not know with what gratitude unspeakable her heart was filled at this proof of his unabated confidence in, and honour for, her. Margaret would not have exchanged the relief and exquisite satisfaction of that moment for a lifetime of happiness.

'It is probable, Margaret, that had this happened a year ago I should not have accepted it—not even have entertained for a moment the idea of entering Parliament,' he began. 'But things are different now, and I am anxious for something which will occupy my thoughts and fill up the measure of my days. I am beginning to find the round of my life too monotonous to be borne.'

He paused a moment, and Margaret, looking on, saw an indefinable change come upon his face. She knew then what was coming, and prepared herself for it.

'You have always been my sister in everything but name, Margaret,' he continued. 'And only I can know what your sisterly love and care have been to me since my mother died. It almost unmans me to think of it. It is because of all that you have been to me that my heart craves for your sympathy in what has proved the bitterest trial of my life.'

There was another brief silence, and then John, resuming his walk, continued in low tones, telling of deep emotion.

'I do not know when I first began to love Gertrude Mayne. I believe it was that day I met her here for the first time. Perhaps you can remember it?'

No need to ask. Ay, Margaret remembered it very well as the beginning of her own bitter pain.

'I had never thought very much about love except as an experience which might come to other men, but never to me. Perhaps that was why it took hold of my innermost being with such intensity. I cannot tell, only I know the time came when I would willingly have laid down my life for her, or even to save her a moment's pain. I was in no hurry to speak. I dreaded that my dream would be rudely ended, and so, by putting off and waiting for a convenient season, I dealt the death-blow to my own hopes. When I did speak it was too late. She was already the betrothed wife of Sir William Lundie. I knew she loved me, or I fancied she did, Margaret, but when I heard of that for a time I lost my faith in woman-kind. It was only when it was too late, the night before her marriage day, that I learned the truth from her own lips. She loved me, but to retrieve her father's fallen fortunes she married as they desired. They sold her for a title and a long rent-roll; and I, but for my cursed procrastination, might

have prevented it. When she was married I thought I would be cured. I had never thought it a possible or probable thing that a man could cherish any feeling of interest in the wife of another man. Margaret, I have proved my mistake. At this moment I love Gertrude, Lady Lundie, as dearly and truly and passionately as ever I loved Gertrude Mayne.'

He paused again, and the woman listening to him turned away her pale face, praying for strength to endure.

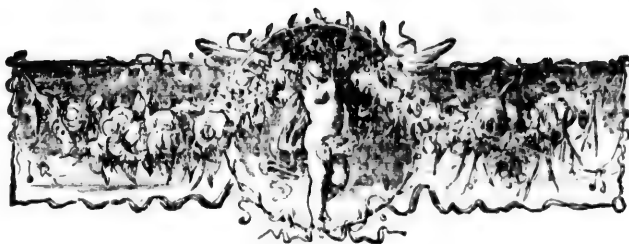
'It is that which has decided me not only to allow my nomination as a candidate for Parliamentary election, but to throw myself heart and soul into the struggle. It is only in hard, engrossing, and incessant work that peace can come to me. Margaret, forgive me if I have wearied you with so much talk of self. I gave you my excuse. My only plea is to be found in your bygone love and patience with me, going back even to the troubles of my boyhood.'

Margaret rose. Never had her face been so beautiful, because now it shone with the unselfishness of noble, generous feeling. John Strathearn had touched the deepest chords of her heart, had awakened again the nobler womanhood which a little jealousy and soreness of heart had for a time kept in the background. Had he not given her the utmost proof of his reverence for her? had he not confided to her keeping the deepest and most sacred emotions of his heart? It was like the man, this noble, delicate, almost wonderful consideration for his friend.

'John,' she said, and her voice shook, 'I cannot tell you how I thank you for this confidence, and I will never forget it. It will be to me the most sacred and precious token of our old love and friendship. Only say you forgive me for my hardness towards you and her. God help and comfort you both. I can say no more.'

'My heart is lighter already because you share my secret, just as it used to be long ago,' said John, with a sunny smile, though his eyes were dim. 'Then we are friends again, Margaret—firm, warm friends for life?'

'Not for life alone, please God, but for eternity, John,' Margaret answered, and their hands met. John held hers a moment in his own, then reverently raised it to his lips.



CHAPTER XI.

JOHN STRATHEARN, M.P.

IN the last day of the year instructions were received by the servants left in charge of Castle Lundie to make preparations for the immediate return of the family. The news spread at once, and before nightfall John Strathearn knew it in Rumford. He met James Blackwood—the younger member of the firm of Blackwood & Son, solicitors in Rumford, and who had been the legal advisers of the Lundies for years. That gentleman—who was about John's age, and had a warm, friendly liking for him—at once told him that it was Sir William's intention to stand.

John smiled. 'I expected it, Mr. Blackwood,' was all he said.

'You will have a pretty tough battle for your seat, if you get it,' laughed young Blackwood, who, though a thorough Conservative, admired John Strathearn's moderate and clear-headed views on politics.

'I expect that also, but the victory will be all the sweeter on that account,' said John, and with a laugh passed on.

The 2.20 train on the afternoon of the 4th of January brought distinguished travellers back to Rumford. The Castle carriage was in waiting, also Sir William's horse—an order he had been particular should be remembered.

The ladies drove off to the Castle at once. Sir William,

followed by his groom, rode to the office of the Messrs. Blackwood and entered it. His visit was so prolonged, that the groom—a raw young fellow, reared in sunny Sussex—stood shivering in the bleak and bitter air, inwardly and outwardly anathematizing the vile Scotch climate.

You may be sure all these proceedings were keenly watched by the townsfolk, who were on the *qui vive* for any election news. It was the first time the seat had been contested in the county for fifty years.

Neither Lady Lundie nor Elizabeth were sorry to return to Scotland. The unhappy death of poor Lord Devanha had cast such a deep gloom over Stoke Abbey that it was with relief they left it. His widow, apparently inconsolable, and sobered by the suddenness and awfulness of the bereavement, had returned to Treby Towers, where she was to be joined by the Trevors to somewhat enliven her dreary solitude. In these sad days every vestige of bitterness against the Countess had died out of Gertrude Lundie's heart, and she had proved herself most devoted, tenderest, gentlest friend and consoler to the new-made widow. Whether she made any impression on her rival's heart time would tell. Lady Lundie and her sister-in-law had a cup of tea together in Gertrude's dressing-room, and discussed the election. Neither had yet heard of any opposing candidate.

'I am very glad William has decided to enter Parliament,' said Miss Lundie. 'It will interest him, and keep him in occupation, which he sadly needs.'

'He has plenty of interests in his estates, Elizabeth, if he cared to bestir himself,' said Gertrude. 'There are innumerable things requiring redress, many wrongs which only a master's intervention could right. At Stoke Abbey things seem right and just enough, but here the tenantry are shamefully neglected. Mr. Macdonald is neither a just nor a conscientious factor.'

'Really, Gertrude, I think you jump too hastily to conclusions. The Macdonalds, father and son, for generations have served as factors for Castle Lundie. You will hardly be a good supporter of William's politics, when you would so ruthlessly sweep away all old institutions.'

'Because they are *old* they are not necessarily good, Eliza-

both,' said Gertrude, with a slight smile; then their talk drifted to other matters, chiefly feminine, and so the afternoon wore away. Dinner was served at six that evening, and, though both ladies noticed a cloud on the master's brow, it was not until the servant left the room that they learned its cause.

'I think I heard in Rumford to-day about the most audacious piece of presumption it has been my lot to encounter,' said Sir William.

'Indeed! What was it? Anything about the election?' asked Miss Lundie.

'Yes. As you could not possibly surmise it, I will tell you. Young Strathearn, inflated with his own egregious conceit and presumption, and incited by the idiots of his party, intends to oppose the return of a Conservative member for the county.'

Miss Lundie laughed and shrugged her shoulders. Lady Lundie's face flushed, and she bent low over her plate to hide it. But those at the table noted it, and Elizabeth Lundie glanced significantly at her brother.

'The puppy!' exclaimed Sir William, with intensity of contempt. 'He will require to be taught the folly of opposing a gentleman, and a Conservative, in —shire. As he has plenty of means, I understand he will be prepared to spend freely, over and above what his party will spend for him. The more the better; they richly deserve to pay for their folly.'

'Isn't he pretty well thought of in the neighbourhood, William?' asked Miss Lundie; while Gertrude, having recovered her momentary confusion, sat up erect and calm, and apparently an unmoved and uninterested listener to their talk.

'Among a certain class whose favour can be bought. Yes; but *that* won't return him to Parliament,' said Sir William savagely.

'Don't be too sure. If I were you I would spare no energy or expense,' said Miss Lundie. 'Don't you remember, ten years ago, how Sir James Wyatt, through the very same contemptuous heedlessness, was worsted in Herefordshire.'

'Really, Elizabeth, you are too absurd; but women cannot be expected to talk sense on matters political, I suppose,' he

said, and the matter dropped. But the time came when he remembered, with bitter chagrin, the warning he had so contemptuously passed by.

In the course of the week the sheriff received the writ for the new election, and the polling was fixed for the 23rd of January. Then the fight began in earnest. John threw himself into his work with all his might, so did his opponent in his own way. As the days went by, the excitement increased, and even the keenest, most impartial observer could not have said which way the wind blew. There were advantages on both sides. The majority of the county families supported Sir William, and these necessarily commanded a wide influence on those around and beneath them. But, on the other hand, John Strathearn was emphatically the man of the people. He had been born and brought up among them, had not only made, but spent his money freely in Rumford, and was literally the 'people's friend.' Many of his townsmen possessed a vote in the county, and these would considerably swell the number in his favour. Then he was an eloquent orator, and not only eloquent, but moderate, yet decided, in his tone. He was a man who knew what he had to say, and said it freely, frankly, and openly, without hesitation or shame. He made no great promises, but those who listened to John Strathearn knew that he would perform in the spirit and in the letter every promise made and pledge given, because they knew the nature of the man, and had proved him to the core. On the other hand, Sir William Lundie had come among them almost as a stranger; his only claim upon them being his name and lineage. He was not popular either as a landlord or as a neighbour; his overbearing and haughty manner, his contempt for all things plebeian, as evinced by his public utterances regarding his opponent, did not go down very well with the electors. Even some of his own supporters could not but admit the bad taste of some of his remarks; and though the secret was not told till long after, there were some old Blues who recorded for John Strathearn simply because they honoured and respected the man. Sir William was no orator, his voice was indistinct and monotonous, and his listless and indifferent manner seemed to admit lack of interest in the cause he was advocat-

ing. Yet that was not so. He was a Tory of Tories, and it was a matter of intense moment to him that his party should not be defeated. Party feeling ran high. The usual amount of election squibs and cartoons—the majority of which were more forcible than elegant—were issued, and every dead wall in Rumford was brilliant with flaring posters. Altogether it was a time of unprecedented excitement and stir in the town, and quiet people lived in a species of nervous terror, and wished the 23rd were over.

There was very little personal canvassing; on John's side none at all. Both candidates, however, visited the outlying hamlets and villages and addressed the electors, and their agents—Blackwoods for Sir William, and Lockhart for Strathearn—worked with indefatigable zeal. John's own personal friends were of infinite service to him, especially Doctor Dunsyre, whose influence in the district was very extensive. In fact, he did himself damage professionally by his zeal for his friend, and the doors of several houses were closed against him; only, however, he knew very well, until some ailment required his attention. A trusted and skilful physician is a little king in his way when he has succeeded in making himself necessary to his patients.

The Macdonalds, father and son, with true Highland doggedness and persistence, worked late and early for their laird; and, as the time drew near, it was whispered abroad that coercion had been brought to bear upon the Castle tenantry. But the majority of them had the courage of their opinions, and the secret of the ballot protected them.

The morning of the 23rd broke grey and stormy, with a cold, wet drizzle blowing in the wind. Voters were early astir, as the booths opened at eight. Both candidates visited the town in the earlier part of the day, and drove to the outlying polling places later.

Between three and four in the afternoon old Mr. Strathearn drove into the town in an open dogcart, and that was the first sight which met John's eyes when he too drove up the High Street in David's gig. He shook his fist good-humouredly at his father, for it was not a day for him to be out. Surely he had managed to steal a march on Argus-eyed Marjorie Fleming. Shortly thereafter a carriage from Castle

Lundie, containing Lady Lundie, Miss Lundie, and Mrs. and Miss Franklin-Mayne, drove through the town. The younger ladies were blue, and Mrs. Mayne had a blue rosette pinned to her dark sealskin mantle. At sight of Gertrude Lundie's sweet face, which looked harassed and worn, the first nervousness crept over John Strathearn, and he turned his troubled eyes away. Perhaps his victory might mean sorrow for her, for Sir William Lundie would not scruple to vent his chagrin upon those of his own household. However, having put his hand to the plough, he could not now turn back, even if he desired. At half-past four the booths were closed, and the ballot-boxes removed to the Sheriff Court-room. Then John and his father went to dine with his chief supporters at the Doctor's house, while Sir William waited in his committee rooms, anxiously anticipating the result of the poll. Shortly before seven o'clock a horseman rode away at a hard gallop from the back entrance to the County Buildings. The echo of a deafening cheer followed him, for at that moment the result of the poll was exhibited at one of the windows.

Strathearn (L.),	.	.	.	.	789
Lundie (C.),	.	.	.	.	700
					<hr/>
Majority for Strathearn,	.				89
					<hr/>





CHAPTER XII.

A DIVIDED HOUSE.

LADY LUNDIE was alone in the drawing-room when she heard her husband ride up to the door. She had dined alone with her sister-in-law, not expecting that Sir William would be home till late. His early return looked ominous, for the successful candidate at an election does not very easily free himself from his admiring and congratulatory supporters. Lady Lundie, however, was not long left in suspense. She heard her husband enter the house, and almost directly his footstep on the stair. She rose and turned her face expectantly to the door. Whenever he entered she knew the result. Defeat was written on his scowling face, fierce anger and chagrin flashed in his piercing eye.

‘You are very early home, William,’ she said timidly.

‘Early! was it likely I should stay to be made the laughing-stock of a drunken and idiotic mob?’ he asked savagely. ‘You will be pleased to-night, Lady Lundie, that your lover, instead of your husband, has won success.’

Lady Lundie looked at her husband’s frowning face with proud wonder on her own. She did not quail beneath his look, nor did even the faintest colour tinge her pale cheek.

‘I think you forget what you are saying, William,’ she said, with gentle dignity. ‘Why should I be pleased at your defeat? It is a great and unexpected disappointment to me,

for you had imbued me with your own sanguine hopes of being successful.'

'You can use very fine and sweet-sounding phrases, my lady,' said Sir William, allowing his passion to get the better of his judgment. 'But, let me tell you, it is actions which speak the truth. What did you do to help my cause? Did you bestir yourself in the smallest degree on my behalf? No! you did not; and more, you would not have raised your little finger to ensure success.'

She stood perfectly silent, looking him in the face with wide, clear, unflinching eyes. She would bear with him still, believing he was but venting the bitterness of his defeat. Better, perhaps, that he should humiliate her than humiliate himself in the eyes of strangers. Therefore she stood still.

'Had I had any other woman but you for my wife, I should have taught that plebeian puppy a different lesson,' he went on, in the same hoarse, passionate tones. 'Know this, madam, that in election times it is the habit for the highest ladies in the land to go among the people, and by their infinite and matchless tact turn the popular favour to the husband, son, or brother, who may be striving for the seat.'

'Had you but told me that, William,' said the trembling wife, in low tones, 'you know how willingly and gladly I should have done my utmost for you. How could I know that it is the custom for ladies to do as you say? At school we were not taught what might be expected of us as wives in election times.'

'The time was when your plea of ignorance might have blinded me, Lady Lundie,' he said slowly. 'But that time has gone. You have had every opportunity for studying the requirements and duties of your position, and you have wilfully passed them by. You thwart and annoy at every turn. You show me every day you live my vast folly in making you my wife. I would I had left you that night I found you with your plebeian lover in your father's grounds. You would have been a fitter mate for him than you are for me.'

'William! William! spare me! What have I done that you should taunt me thus? Ask your own conscience. Have I failed in any duty I owe to you? If I have, the fault is yours, because you have not helped me in the stony way I have had to walk since I married you.'

'I know too well *why* you married me. It is no uncommon thing for a woman in this degenerate age to give herself in exchange for such substantial gifts as I bestowed upon you. Only there are instances in which the recipient of the gifts has exhibited more gratitude than you have done to me. It was the least I could expect that *when* you married me you should at least bury out of sight your other love, and not make it so public a thing that all who looked might read it in your face. You could not even hide it from Elizabeth, who has spoken of it to me more than once.'

Lady Lundie raised her nerveless hands and pressed them to her throbbing temples. Pressed and hemmed in on every side, she had no more to say. The inner and most sacred instincts of her nature so cruelly outraged by the husband who had vowed to love, honour, and cherish her, what could she say in self-defence? Knowing herself blameless, yet knowing, too, that she could never convince the angry man before her that she *was* blameless, she would be silent and *wait*. Perhaps time would be her most merciful avenger. She turned about in a slow, dazed way and glided from the room, her white robes trailing noiselessly behind her, her hands clasped before her, so that her rings cut deep into the tender flesh.

Lady Lundie was seen no more that night by the inmates of Castle Lundie—even faithful Clare, a sympathizing but dumb witness to all her lady's sorrows, was denied admittance. How was this miserable tragedy to end?

Before breakfast next morning, Sir William Lundie, busy with some correspondence in the library, was interrupted by the entrance of his wife. She was deadly pale; even her lips matched the hue of her white morning robe. The purple shadows round the sweet, pathetic eyes, the cruel and sad lines about the mouth, told of a sleepless night.

She advanced to the table, and, laying one hand upon it, waited till he laid down his pen.

'Well?' he said, in a coldly inquiring voice.

'I have come to say, William, that, as I cannot expect that you should still desire one you think so unworthy to remain under your roof-tree, I am prepared and willing to return to my mother before you go to London, as Elizabeth tells me you intend to do next week.'

Sir William did not at once meet that calm, clear, questioning gaze. The passion was off him now, and, if he would own it, he was ashamed of his violence of the previous evening.

'How can you suggest such an absurd and impossible thing, Gertrude?' he said. 'Although we are not a happy or a well-matched pair, and though we have both discovered our mistake, there is no occasion for a public scandal. It is our duty to deceive the world to the best of our ability as long as we possibly can.'

'Unless you retract your words of last night, spoken perhaps in the heat of passion, I must hold to the decision made in the silent hours of a sleepless night,' his wife made answer calmly.

He pushed back his chair and rose. He foresaw that, to avert dreaded publicity, he must make some sort of an apology to the white and resolute woman he had insulted in his wrath.

'Don't let us have any more heroics, Gertrude. You must make some allowance for a man who was annoyed as I was last night. I admit I spoke as I should not have spoken. Let us kiss and be friends again, and for my sake don't do anything which can make the world talk, or procure for us the unenviable notoriety of a paragraph in the society journals.'

A smile, something scornful, dawned upon his wife's pale face.

'To avoid the publicity you so much dread, I will accompany you to London, on condition that you will not again forget the respect due to me. I have hitherto borne much and made no sign, but the limit of endurance can be reached at last,' she said slowly, and left the room. But though she had conceded so much for him, she was changed, and never again would be to him the Gertrude of old. Husband and wife must henceforth be strangers in everything but name.

Owing to the urgent nature of the affairs demanding the attention of Her Majesty's Ministers, Parliament reassembled at an unusually early date, the fifth of February, so the West End was full before the year was very old. The Lundies had been at Lundie House, Piccadilly, a fortnight before the Earl and Countess of Leybourne arrived at their London house in Carlton Gardens. A son and heir had been born to the old and honourable house of St. Roque, and, though the young

mother was still somewhat delicate, their return to town could be no longer delayed, for Parliamentary business demanded the Earl's attention. He was a keen politician, and, as the representative of one of the oldest Whig families in the State, took his seat for his native county. The day after their arrival Lady Lundie drove alone to Carlton Gardens. Her heart was hungering unspeakably for the one being in the great wilderness of London she could truly call friend. 'Yes, Lady Leybourne was at home, lying down for an hour in her dressing-room, where she would be delighted to see Lady Lundie at once.' Such was the reply given to Gertrude's inquiry, and she was at once ushered up-stairs. Whenever the door closed, leaving her alone with the fair young mother, Gertrude crossed the room with rapid step, and, kneeling down, took the fragile form in her arms. And for a brief moment they held each other close, and there was no word said.

Now let me look at you, Gertrude,' said Eleanor at last. 'Oh, my darling, you are greatly changed! Have you been ill?'

'Not physically,' answered Gertrude hurriedly. 'How well you look, and what a lovely colour you have!'

'Oh, that is the joy of seeing you. I am not getting well very fast. Wilfred wanted me to remain at Leybourne Park alone for another month, but of course that was out of the question. I could not bear to be parted from my husband so long, Gertrude, and I am such a keen politician that I am never content unless I hear the latest intelligence from his lips. William's defeat in —shire would be a great disappointment?'

'It was, especially as it was so unexpected,' Gertrude answered rather briefly.

'Would you believe that I, a descendant of such an ancient and loyal Conservative house, should have so readily changed the colour of my coat?' said the Countess gleefully. 'But my excuse is that a wife must be subject in all things, you know, and of course Wilfred's opinions must be the ones for me to hold.'

Gertrude laughed. It was impossible to resist the charm of that bright and happy spirit, whose influence was as genial as that of the summer sun.

'Seriously, though, I believe that the successful candidate will very ably represent your interests in the House,' said Lady Leybourne. 'Of course you would hear he made his maiden speech last night, and created a most favourable impression? Wilfred came home charmed, and told me he had never heard such an able, thoughtful, and quietly eloquent speech on the vexed question of Colonial interests. He also had some conversation with Mr. Strathearn in the lobby, and predicts a most successful future for him. He is going to ask him to dine with us some day soon.'

Gertrude had walked over to the window, and she heard her sister-in-law's remarks in silence. Ay, the Earl's prognostications were correct enough. John Strathearn would make his mark in any sphere of life.

'Of course you want to see baby?' said the Countess presently, thinking Gertrude was not absorbingly interested in politics. 'Oh, Gertrude, he is such a beauty!—such a lovely, precious baby!'

'Of course he is! and of course I want to see him! Where is he?' asked Gertrude, with a smile.

'In the nursery. No, don't ring. I am quite able to walk there with you. He may be asleep, you know, and it would be a pity to awake him by having him carried in here,' said the Countess; and, rising, she opened the door and led the way across the corridor to the large and luxurious nursery which had been fitted up for the son and heir.

The nurse, a pretty, pleasant-faced girl, was sewing in the window, and the child was asleep in his dainty cot. The young mother stepped lightly across the floor, and with tender hands drew aside the costly lace-trimmed coverings, revealing a sweet baby face hushed in the beautiful repose of sound and health-giving slumber. Gertrude's eyes filled with tears, and, stooping down, she touched with her lips the little pink hands lying outside the coverlet.

'May God keep him and make him a joy and a blessing to you and Wilfred, Eleanor!' she said earnestly; then they stole back to the room they had left.

'His grandmother, the Duchess, is wild with delight over him. She was with me all the time,' said Eleanor. 'Oh, Gertrude, I have found a mother indeed in Wilfred's dear, kind mother!'

'I do not marvel at that. It would be impossible to be with you and not love and care for you, dear Eleanor,' said Gertrude.

'So Wilfred says. I am so happy sometimes, Gertrude, I am afraid lest it cannot last. But there, I am too selfish in my talk! I am concerned to see you looking so worn, and so—so unhappy,' said Lady Leybourne, with a slight hesitation. 'Could you not tell me a little about the trouble? It eases me always to tell things to Wilfred.'

'It can all be told in one sentence, Eleanor. You know the old Bible words, "How can a husband and wife walk together except they be agreed?" That is true of us. Ours is a divided home, and, like the one referred to in Scripture also, I fear it cannot stand. Dear Eleanor, whatever the future may be, will you try and believe that I tried humbly and faithfully to do my duty? I do not know how it is that I seem to have missed the way.'

'My darling, I shall never believe anything but what is noble, and true, and good of you,' said Eleanor Leybourne, with filling eyes. 'May God help and comfort you, and, if it is His will, give you happiness yet.'

At that moment the Duchess of St. Roque was announced, and Gertrude rose hurriedly to go, but Eleanor detained her. The baby's grandmother was a stately and striking-looking woman, retaining in her later life much of the beauty which had distinguished her in youth. It was easy to see that she loved her son's wife with a mother's love.

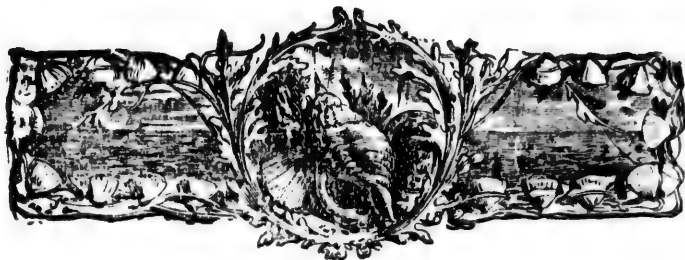
'This is William's wife, grandmamma,' said Lady Leybourne, and the Duchess, after one keen look at the slight, girlish figure, bent her stately head and kissed her cheek.

'I am pleased to meet you, Lady Lundie; my daughter has talked to me so much of you,' she said, with a kind and gracious motherliness exquisite to see.

Gertrude uttered her hurried words of thanks, and almost immediately took her leave.

That it was no fleeting impression she had made on the mind of the baby's grandmother may be gathered from the following announcement, which appeared in the list of presentations to Her Majesty at the Drawing-room held early in March:—

'Lady Lundie, on her marriage, by the Duchess of St. Roque.'



CHAPTER XIII.

THE SHADOW OF THE PAST.

LADY Lundie was admired, but was not what is termed a success in society. She was one fitted rather to make the sunshine of some quiet and happy home than to be a brilliant leader of fashion. Her manner was quiet in the extreme, her whole demeanour retiring, and there was also about her a listless indifference which indicated a lack of interest in her surroundings. And yet never had the hospitalities of Lundie House been dispensed with such a royal and gracious hand. Her first dinner was one of the assured successes of the season, chiefly owing to her consummate tact, and exquisite though unobtrusive effort to make each guest feel thoroughly at home. Those who were privileged to gain a few minutes' private conversation with Sir William Lundie's girl-wife, went away charmed with her intelligent and thoughtful remarks upon the topics of the day, and charmed with her frank, gracious manner and engaging sweetness of disposition. But these were the few; among the many Lady Lundie was passed by as an insignificant and not at all a striking woman. But the fact that the Duchess of St. Roque and the Countess of Leybourne were her dearest and closest friends, gave her at once a very decided position in society. The Duchess, noted for her exclusiveness, must have found something to love and honour in Sir William Lundie's wife, else she would not be seen so frequently in public with her. Indeed, her love and

attention seemed to be divided between Lady Leybourne and Lady Lundie. What unspeakable strength and comfort the love and friendship of these two true-hearted women gave to the desolate wife I cannot tell you.

Elizabeth Lundie missed her friend Lady Devanha very much that season. She possessed no other intimate companion, for she was not of a nature to attract or make friends easily. She was inwardly rather galled at the marked favour with which Gertrude was received in the very best circles, and again the mean and jealous mind was kindled against her.

One April evening the twain were sitting together in the spacious drawing-room at Lundie House, Elizabeth visibly yawning over the latest three-volume novel, Gertrude sitting in one of the long windows, alternately watching the throng passing and re-passing, and feasting her eyes upon the wealth of spring beauty and promise in the park across the way. Even so a year ago Elizabeth had sat in that very window weaving her schemes and plans for the future.

'Where is William to-night, Gertrude?' asked Miss Lundie, tossing aside her book at last in evident disgust. 'I wonder if he will be home in time to take us to the Haymarket? The new play gets such a glowing critique in the *Morning Post* to-day, that I feel curious to see it.'

'I believe he has only gone over to Wilfred's, Elizabeth, on some business matter,' replied Gertrude. 'Here he comes now. It is just seven; there is ample time for you yet.'

Sir William, entering the house, came straight to the drawing-room. Both ladies were already in evening attire, half-past seven being the dinner-hour at Lundie House.

'Have you been to Wilfred's? How are they all to-night?' asked Elizabeth.

'They seem well. They are entertaining to-night. Eleanor's first political dinner, under the supervision of her mother-in-law,' said Sir William, with a curl of the lip which told that something had annoyed him.

'Oh yes, of course. This is the 13th. I forgot about the dinner, or I should have reminded you. Have they many guests?'

'I did not inquire about the quantity; the quality was sufficient for me, seeing I met a specimen of it in the shape of the member for —shire, so I left the house,' said Sir William drily, and looking straight at his wife.

Elizabeth laughed. 'There is a policy in Wilfred's hospitalities,' she said briefly.

'Of course. Were it not in the interests of his party, there is no man more particular about his associates than Leybourne. He admitted to me that Strathearn supported him so ably in his Afghan motion, that he felt obliged, against his inclination, to ask him to dinner as a sort of reward. Of course, the honour of being asked to dine with Lord Leybourne would ensure Strathearn's support in any measure.'

Lady Lundie brought her eyes back from the glowing bloom of a hawthorn tree in the park, and fixed them calmly on her husband's face.

'I think you are mistaken, William,' she said quietly. 'I have heard Lord Leybourne repeatedly express the warmest admiration and friendship for Mr. Strathearn, and Eleanor herself told me Wilfred has made no such intimate friend since the death of his cousin, Lord Francis Heathcote.'

Sir William bowed. 'I stand corrected. With so many noble friends and supporters, Mr. Strathearn is as likely to be successful in political and social life as he has hitherto been in the working of his mills.'

Slowly Lady Lundie turned her head away. The covert sneer brought no flush to the pale cheek now; the outward panoply had grown accustomed to such thrusts, and had ceased to make any sign. But the inner being was not invulnerable, as the shadowing eyes, these mirrors of the soul, betrayed.

'Eleanor's assembly will not be a party affair, William?' said Miss Lundie inquiringly.

'How can I tell to what lengths Leybourne's party spirit may lead him? and Eleanor is his abject slave. She indeed presents a fine and unique example of wifely obedience and duty in this most degenerate age,' he said indolently, and sauntered away to his dressing-room.

No man in London lived a more purposeless and indolent life than Sir William Lundie. He had no pursuit, no hobby, nothing in which he was absorbingly interested. And yet he was not without ability, only the springs of his nobler manhood had been sapped and poisoned by the dissipations of his youth. He was one of those who, by some reason or other, miss completely the aim of their existence, and who make no mark upon the times in which they live.

Lady Leybourne's assembly was *the* event of the first week in May. The spacious and princely mansion in Carlton Gardens was eminently fitted for such an entertainment, and though many a gay and brilliant throng had assembled in these beautiful rooms, Lady Leybourne's first ball bade fair to eclipse them all. Apart from their high social position, the young couple were greatly beloved, and the majority of those asked to share their lavish hospitality were tried and true friends.

The Duchess of St. Roque, though so fondly attached to the gentle girl her son had wooed and won, had not been free from certain misgivings regarding her ability to uphold the ancient honour and *prestige* of the house, but before she had been many weeks in London these fears were all dispelled, and she saw with the utmost satisfaction that her daughter-in-law bade fair to outrival her in society.

Invitations had, of course, been sent to Lundie House, but, owing to a whim of Sir William's to sit out a dreary play at the Court Theatre, the party did not arrive until nearly eleven o'clock.

Miss Lundie was amazed, but Gertrude's face wore that look of supreme and beautiful composure which was not now to be ruffled by trifles. When she entered the room, she became at once the object of much admiration and remark. She was indeed a vision of pure, pale loveliness, like the narcissus which looped up the drapery of her dress. It was of exquisite and costly white lace, unrelieved by any colour whatsoever. It came high and close about the graceful throat, where it was fastened with a huge bunch of the white flowers she loved. The sleeves were short, and it was upon the round, fair arms, quite visible through the delicate lace mitts, that her only ornaments were,—diamond bracelets of exquisite design and purest lustre, which at every gesture shone like little points of flame.

She was quite unconscious of the sensation her appearance created, and when Eleanor whispered to her by and by how fair she looked, and how proud she was of her, Gertrude only smiled, and shook her head.

'And now come. I have wanted so often to introduce to you Mr. Strathearn. He is here to-night. Our circle is not complete without him now. You can have no idea how Wilfred loves him, and I am glad of it, for he is a good and

noble man. I am glad, too, that Wilfred has found some one at last to fill the blank left by Cousin Frank's death. A wife is a great deal to a man, you know, dear, but it is a good thing for him to have one true friend of his own sex,' said Lady Leybourne, with a pretty air of wisdom. 'Ah, there is Mr. Strathearn; I see Wilfred is bringing him here.'

'It will not be necessary to introduce us, Eleanor,' said Lady Lundie faintly. 'Mr. Strathearn and I have met before, as was natural, living near the same town.'

'Have you? How odd that you should never have mentioned it to me,' said Lady Leybourne. 'Well, that being the case, I will not wait, but leave you to renew an old acquaintance.'

So saying, the happy hostess flitted away to some other guest, and presently John Strathearn took her place.

'Good evening, Lady Lundie,' said the grave, sweet, pleasant tones. 'Am I permitted to renew an old friendship, and to express the pleasure I have in meeting you in London?'

Every word was studied, and the polite expression of courtesy at once restored Lady Lundie's fleeting composure. She raised her eyes to the noble face bent slightly towards her, bowed graciously, and made answer calmly.

'The pleasure is mutual, Mr. Strathearn. Will you accept of an old friend's congratulations upon your success in public life?'

It was admirably said, and seemed to indicate that Lady Lundie was learning her society lessons very well. Again it was but the outward cloak, for at that moment the room and its assembled throng had passed away from her view, and she was standing alone at the stile looking across to the Running Burn, and the same face was before her, but not wearing the polite and indifferent worldly mask.

'Lady Lundie, will you do me the honour? The music is tempting,' said the deep and manly voice.

She rose at once, laid her cold hand on his arm, and they joined the dancers. She knew that somewhere her husband's cold eyes were watching her; she felt them in her inmost soul.

'How is your father? Is he with you in London?' she asked presently.

'He is. My public life is a great source of gratification and pride to my father, which gives it a greater zest for me, Lady Lundie.'

'Indeed! Then, have you rooms or a house in London?'

'Rooms, in the meantime, in Curzon Street; but, if my father is spared to come to London with me another year, it is my intention to take a house.'

'Ah, that will be pleasant! Do you hear sometimes from your old friends in Rumford?'

'Frequently. Doctor Dunsyre came up last month to hear Lord Leybourne on the Afghan question. Margaret is well.'

'Do you remember the last ball at which we danced together, Mr. Strathearn?' asked Lady Lundie suddenly.

John made no reply, because he dared not say how well he remembered it, and its many memories, bitter and sweet.

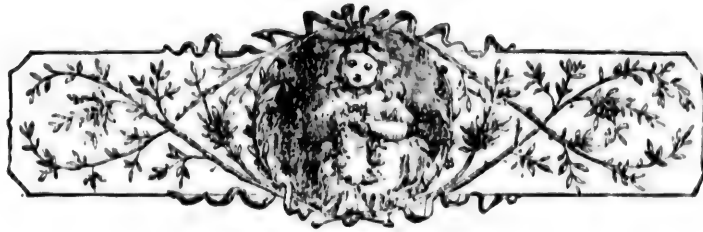
'I trust you enjoy your London life, Lady Lundie?' he said at length.

'Enjoy it?' she repeated wonderingly; then her face flushed. 'Oh yes; some parts of it very much. Will you kindly take me to a seat now? I am quite giddy. I do not think I am so strong as I was.'

'I fear not, indeed, Lady Lundie,' said John, in tones of infinite compassion. As he turned to lead her to a chair, Sir William Lundie came up and held out his arm to his wife.

'Sir, I will relieve you of the care of my wife,' he said, with imperious contempt. 'Lady Lundie, be good enough to remember that I do not choose that you should again dance with this *gentleman*,' he added, with a deep and peculiar emphasis on the last word, which John felt in his inmost soul. He took no notice of the insulting word, however, but simply relinquished the fair hand he had held on his arm, and, with a bow, turned upon his heel. He had ignored completely the presence of Sir William, and did not even allow his eyes to travel to his face.

The words, happily, were inaudible to those standing nearest, but the scene was observed by many, who were not slow to comprehend its meaning. It was observed, among others, by Lord Leybourne, and when John very shortly intimated his intention to leave, the Earl in a few words apologized for his brother-in-law's behaviour, and pressed him to remain. But John, pleading a desire to spend an hour in the House of Commons, begged to be excused, and, bidding his hostess farewell, left the house. But his colleagues saw none of him that night, and he paced the moonlit glades of St. James's until the light was dawning in the eastern sky.



CHAPTER XIV.

FAREWELL.

HAVE a long letter from Lady Devanha this morning, William,' said Miss Lundie at breakfast one June morning.

'Indeed! and what news has Sophia? Does she say anything of her plans for the future?' asked Sir William, without lifting his eyes from his paper.

'Yes, it all relates to her plans. She has finally decided to rejoin Mr. and Mrs. Bordillion in Calcutta. They wrote urgently desiring her to do so, as her sister is far from strong, and seems to long very much for her society.'

'I am more than astonished to hear it,' said Sir William, and he spoke the truth. He had not imagined that her bereavement could have taken so firm a hold upon Sophia Devanha's frivolous heart, as to make her willing to resign all the pleasures she could command in English society of the first rank.

'She has no intention of permanently remaining in India,' continued Miss Lundie, with the open sheet before her. 'She speaks of spending a year or so, and then returning to England. At the end of two years Mr. Bordillion's term of office expires.'

'I am astonished at Sophia, when she is so handsomely left.'

'I am not. She is rather young to be set aside as the

Dowager Countess; and then, you see, it is not very pleasant for her to see Walter's wife reigning at Treby Towers and Wilderhaugh.'

'Where does she write from?'

'Westbrook Hall, in Kent—that small place left specially to her in the will. It is her only residence, unless she chooses to purchase an estate for herself out of the fortune Eric settled upon her at their marriage.'

'Does she mention any definite date for her departure?'

'Yes; she sails in the *Peshawur* on the 9th of August, and she desires me to spend the intervening time with her at Westbrook. I shall probably go next week.'

'Yes, go by all means. I am very sorry for poor Sophia,' said Sir William. 'You can tell her when you write that we hope to see her at Castle Lundie before she goes. I intend that we shall return early in July.'

Lady Lundie was at the table, but she had not been included in the conversation. She was interested in Lady Devanha's plans, however, as she still felt sincerely sympathetic for her, and she thought she understood the feeling which made her desire to leave England. But Gertrude did not know that the widow's fleeting grief had passed away, and that it was simply to make the required time of mourning less dreary that she had decided to revisit the scenes where her early womanhood had been spent, and where she had been wooed and won.

'I did not know we were to leave London so soon, William,' said Lady Lundie. 'I accepted the invitation for the Duchess of St. Roque's dinner on the 10th.'

'Her Grace must accept an apology instead, then,' he retorted ungraciously. 'Not even the felicity of dining at Leybourne House will induce me to spend another month in London. It is a weariness alike to flesh and spirit.'

Lady Lundie was not sorry at the prospect of leaving London. Her eyes, grown weary of the heat and glare of a London midsummer, were longing unspeakably for the green and lovely solitudes of Castle Lundie, for the heather-scented air and the free winds of the land she loved. She was also craving for a sight of her own kindred, from whom she had been parted so long. Neither her mother nor sister had ever

been asked to spend a night beneath her roof-tree, and they had only once been formally asked to dine at Castle Lundie. Sir William, indeed, had been true to his word, and had kept his wife's relatives at arm's length. The following week Miss Lundie joined her friend at Westbrook, and almost immediately Sir William caused preparations to be set on foot for the return of his household to Scotland.

By the middle of July Lundie House was shut up, and its inmates out of town. To Lady Lundie the beauty and peace of Castle Lundie during these long golden summer days were sweet and refreshing, and nearly all her time was spent out of doors. She drove out a great deal alone; often, of an afternoon, to Meadowflats, to take tea with her mother and sister.

Mrs. Franklin-Mayne, having been at length convinced that her daughter's marriage had not, and never would, bring her any nearer to Castle Lundie, nor to the high rank it represented, had ceased to fret over it, and endeavoured to be content with such society as was open to her. And she contrived to make her life pass pleasantly enough; and, if her talk about Lady Lundie's success in society, her presentation at Court, and other items with which the fashionable journals supplied her, was rather wearisome, her listeners, though a little bored, excused her motherly vanity and pride. Caroline was relieved to see that Gertrude appeared in better health and spirits than she had done in the early part of the year. The first year of her married life, with its many trials and sorrows, had passed away, and, though it had aged and changed her, her girlish beauty was now more fully matured, and had received the last finishing touches of grace and elegance.

One afternoon, returning from Meadowflats by way of the town, she met Margaret Dunsyre not many yards from her own door. Remembering the cold restraint of their last meeting, Lady Lundie simply bowed, but did not offer to draw rein, until Margaret stepped from the pavement to the side of the phaeton. Then Lady Lundie saw a look in the fine blue eyes she had missed for long, and involuntarily held out her hand.

'Dear Lady Lundie,' said Margaret, 'will you forgive me

for the past? I professed great friendship for you, but my actions belied my words. I am truly sorry for it; will you forgive me for the sake of old days?'

'Surely, Margaret,' said Gertrude, with the sunny smile of yore. 'I could not understand, but I still loved. I do not readily forget an old friend.'

'Thank you,' was all Margaret said, but she held Gertrude's hand still very closely in her own, and her eyes were eloquent. 'I am truly glad to see you look so well. You are greatly changed; how, I could not describe. You look so distinguished, and—and'—

Gertrude's laugh interrupted her.

'You use mamma's very words, Margaret. Ay, a season in London must of necessity work some change. It is a strange experience, half-sad, half-happy. Your friend has greatly distinguished himself in Parliament.'

'So I understand, but so we expected,' Margaret answered. 'You would not meet him often, I suppose?'

'Not often, although he is a constant visitor at my sister-in-law's house. Lord Leybourne and he are close and dear friends.'

'Indeed!' Margaret looked surprised. 'Then our John has been successful in more ways than one?'

Gertrude nodded. She did not dream that her old friend possessed the secret of John Strathearn's life and hers, and that it was that knowledge which had awakened the bygone love into new and beautiful life.

'Well, I will be going. I am very glad to have seen you to-day, dear Margaret, and to find you unchanged once more,' said Lady Lundie. 'Good-bye.'

'Good-bye, and God bless you, Gertrude!' Margaret said earnestly, and they parted on the old friendly terms.

In the last week of July Miss Lundie wrote to say that Lady Devanha did not think of coming to Scotland before she sailed, but would be glad if Sir William could make it convenient to come to London and bid her *bon voyage* on the 9th, and then he could escort Elizabeth home to Castle Lundie.

Gertrude did not see that letter, nor did her husband tell her his intention, but simply said that business called him to

London in the second week of August. But she was shrewd enough to guess the nature of the errand.

'If you see Lady Devanha in London, William,' she said, as she bade him good-bye, 'please give her my kind regards and sympathy, and tell her I very heartily wish her God-speed.'

'I will not fail to deliver your message,' he answered, rather taken aback to find his wife so penetrating.

She was left alone for some days, then Sir William and Miss Lundie returned on the 10th. The following day a party arrived for the shooting, and Lady Lundie's time of rest and solitude was over. For a fortnight she had to dispense the hospitalities of Castle Lundie, and, though none of the guests were *friends*, she did her utmost for their comfort and enjoyment. Sir William seemed pleased with her efforts, and never since their marriage had he appeared kinder or more solicitous for her welfare. The gentle, unselfish heart, ever ready to appreciate kindness, was not slow to respond to his unusual care, and she came nearer being happy in that autumn time than she had ever been before, and in after years that time remained fixed upon her memory as the happiest period of her life at Castle Lundie.

After his guests separated, Sir William seemed restless and out of sorts. He paid frequent visits to London on the plea of public business. Lady Lundie, puzzled to understand his new-born interest in public affairs, spoke of it to her sister-in-law.

'Well, to tell the truth, Gertrude, I believe William is anxious for an Indian appointment under Government,' said Miss Lundie. 'He said as much to me months ago, when we were in London in spring. With his experience of Indian affairs, he will have no difficulty in obtaining what he seeks. He gave great satisfaction, I know, in his last office.'

In the intensity of her surprise, Lady Lundie grew pale to the lips.

'Is it possible he is seeking such an appointment without my knowledge? I cannot believe that he would not have spoken to me first!' she exclaimed.

'My dear, I thought you would have learned by this time

that it is not William's habit to consult any one about his plans,' said Miss Lundie serenely. 'You will see I am quite right.'

Elizabeth Lundie knew very well what she was talking about, because she was aware of her brother's intention up to the very day he had put it into execution. A day or two later the daily papers announced the appointment of Sir William Lundie to a lucrative and responsible Government post in Calcutta. It was added that the appointment gave general satisfaction, for Sir William Lundie's knowledge and experience of Indian affairs were well known. Lady Lundie was not only shocked and surprised, she was deeply pained. To her the step pointed to but one meaning,—her husband's desire to be again near Lady Devanha. Then she was not prepared, on so brief a notice, to go to that far land,—to leave, perhaps for ever, every tie which bound her to the land of her birth. On the afternoon of the day upon which the announcement appeared, Sir William returned home. His wife received him somewhat coldly, but did not broach the subject until he spoke of it himself.

'The announcement in to-day's paper would be a surprise to you, Gertrude?' he said.

'It was, although Elizabeth had somewhat prepared me for it,' she answered briefly. 'What had I done that I was not fit to be trusted with plans which would so materially affect my future as well as yours?'

'Well, you see, Gertrude, I had not much hope of success, and I did not want to speak until I was sure,' he said, in conciliatory tones.

'When do you enter upon your duties?' she asked.

'As soon as possible, though there is no date fixed. I think of leaving England before the end of the year.'

'And this is the 17th of November,' she said slowly.

'There is not very much time for me to prepare, William.'

'Well, Gertrude, the fact is, there have been no arrangements made for you to accompany me,' he said slowly.

There was a brief silence, then his wife looked straight at him with wide, clear, searching eyes.

'Then it is your intention to leave me behind, William?' was all she said

'It will be infinitely better. You are not strong, the climate would kill you in a month, and a year or two will soon pass,' he said quickly. 'I have made every arrangement for your comfort. You can make your home either here or at the Abbey; and whether Elizabeth remains or not, you have my liberty to have your mother and sister residing with you all the time. You will have every freedom and liberty. I will place no restrictions upon you, and I will write to you regularly.'

'Yes, you have made every arrangement for my comfort,' she repeated quietly.

'Why do you look at me like that? I fancied you would be grateful to me for ridding you of my presence,' he said a trifle bitterly. 'It is not so long ago since you spoke of a separation. Here is an opportunity, and the world, even in its most evil-speaking mood, cannot make a scandal of it. It is quite common for the wives of Indian officials to remain at home when delicate health forbids them to risk the trying climate.'

'As your plans are all made, and as *you* so evidently desire that separation, William,' said Lady Lundie slowly, 'I have nothing to say, except that I thank you for your kind consideration for me.'

There was no more said upon the subject. Lady Lundie never of her own accord mentioned it again, and the days went by till the time of parting came. He asked her to accompany him to London, but she declined.

'I can wish you God-speed just as well here, William,' she said, with quivering lip, which told of a burdened heart; 'and as Elizabeth is going, you have no need for me.'

It was on a grey and cheerless December afternoon that husband and wife stood together in the library at Castle Lundie to bid each other farewell. The carriage was at the door, Miss Lundie already seated therein. As they stood in silence, the events of the past eighteen months strangely passed in rapid succession before the minds of both.

'My heart is heavy with a strange presentiment that we shall never meet again, William,' said the young wife, in a low voice. 'If it is I who am called hence first, will you keep a corner in your heart for me? I did you wrong when

I married you without that love which is the most sacred necessity in married life; and the shadow of that wrong has been with us ever since, and has hindered me in my earnest endeavours to fulfil my duty to you. But when you are far away from me, perhaps all my shortcomings will fade away, and you will only think of me kindly as a poor, disappointed, and unhappy wife.'

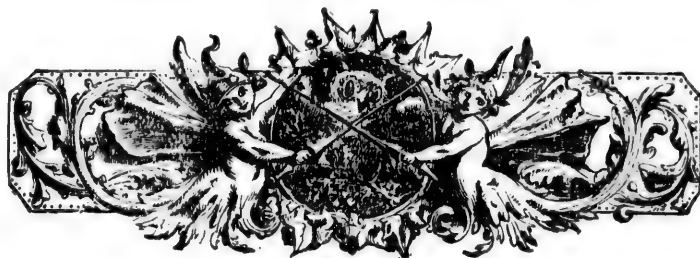
William Lundie turned his head away, and for a little did not speak. Again at this parting moment the good in him sprang to the surface, and the impulse was upon him to snatch his wife to his heart, to bid her come with him to keep him from evil, to be his guiding star to a better life. A knock at the door, conveying something of his sister's impatience, swept that impulse away for ever. He took his wife in his arms, and for a moment held her very close.

'Gertrude, forgive *me* the past,' was all he said, 'and try to think the best of me when I am gone.'

'Yes, yes,' she said, through falling tears. 'And perhaps, if we are spared to meet again, it may be to find that this separation was best for us both. Good-bye, my husband, and God go with you. That is my earnest prayer.'

So they parted, to meet again on earth no more.





CHAPTER XV.

WON.

REALLY, Gertrude, I think it was your duty to go with Sir William,' said Mrs. Franklin-Mayne pensively. 'I know that I never would have allowed your poor dear father to go away to India alone ; but people are different.'

'You forget, mamma,' said Lady Lundie quietly, 'I was quite willing to accompany my husband. It was by his express desire that I remained behind.'

'That is extraordinary, and, I must say, most unkind. Your position will be peculiar in the extreme, almost like that of a widow, in fact,' said Mrs. Mayne. 'And what does the man suppose is to become of you, living in that great house alone, with no companionship but that of your — ahem — rather disagreeable sister-in-law?'

'It was about that I came to speak, mamma,' said Lady Lundie. 'I have a letter from Elizabeth this morning, saying she intends spending Christmas with the Trevors at Upbridge Hall. They are connections of the late Lord Devanha. She also says her return to Castle Lundie is indefinite, if, in fact, she should return at all. It was my husband's desire that you and Caroline should take up your abode with me during his absence. What do you think of it?'

Mrs. Mayne immediately got into a flutter of pleasurable

excitement. After all, Sir William's solitary sojourn in India might prove to be a very fortunate thing for her.

'I am glad he had so much sense, Gertrude. I must say I scarcely expected it, seeing he has not shown his wife's relatives much courtesy. And, of course, you are so absurdly observant of his slightest wish, that you never would have asked us without his consent.'

Gertrude smiled slightly.

'I have thought it over, mamma, and I think the best way would be to let Meadowflats for a year or two, and make your home for a time entirely with me. When we weary of Castle Lundie we can go to Stoke Abbey or to Lundie House; and Sir William has been so generous with me, that we might take that Continental trip together of which I have so often heard you speak.'

'Why, my love, that will be charming! won't it, Caroline?' asked Mrs. Mayne in delight.

'Very, mamma,' Caroline answered quietly, yet with unmistakable pleasure, for the prospect of being constantly beside Gertrude was very sweet.

These plans were accordingly carried into immediate execution, and the new year saw the ladies from Meadowflats domiciled at Castle Lundie. It pleased Rumford gossips to approve of these arrangements as the very best that could be made, for, of course, it would not be a good thing for Lady Lundie, when she was not strong enough to bear the voyage to India, to live in loneliness in Castle Lundie.

The first weeks of the new year were full of quiet peace and happiness to Lady Lundie. It was like the calm after the storm, and recalled to her heart many old, sweet memories connected with her girlhood. January was exceptionally mild, and its brief yet genial sunshine surprised into life many tiny blades and buds a month before their time. Caroline and she spent much of their time out of doors, and their intercourse now was that of sisters indeed. It was during these pleasant outings that Gertrude confided to her sister all the trials and sorrows of her married life, and the elder sister was deeply touched by the spirit of unselfishness in which she spoke, always blaming herself rather than her husband, but Caroline was not deceived. The whole sad story of a mistaken step

was singularly plain to her, and if she felt a little bitterness in her heart against the Lundies, she may be forgiven. It was during these pleasant moments of sisterly confidence, too, that Gertrude broached to Caroline the subject of her own brief love-affair.

'I have often wondered, Caroline, whether there was no more of it,' she said gently. 'Have you never seen Doctor Dunsyre since that time?'

'Seen him! Yes, frequently, but what of that?' asked Caroline, with a half sad, half bitter smile. 'He is not a man who will sue twice to a woman, and I am not the woman to betray by word or look that I would be willing to listen.'

'You are as proud as ever, Caroline,' said Gertrude, with a slight smile; but Caroline shook her head.

'Nay. There was a time when I was too proud even to admit to myself the possibility that I might experience that strange thing called love. Life looks very different to me now, Gertrude. I believe this has come to me to show me the world was not made for me. I used to think that because I had a fine face and figure, my fortune was made. Your marriage convinced me of the folly of that idea, and then it was too late, for I had put away from me for ever the love which could not offer me, perhaps, the highest things of the world, but which was my best and happiest destiny.'

'Not for ever, Caroline,' said Lady Lundie gently. 'It may—nay, must—come all right yet.'

'Not in the way you think,' said Caroline quietly. 'I have frequently heard the rumour, and my own observation has confirmed it; he is to be married some time this year to his cousin Ellen Carter, at Craigerook.'

'I have heard it also,' Lady Lundie admitted. 'What a strangely ravelled skein life is, Caroline! Sometimes one's faith in a Higher Power is shaken by the mysteries and the apparently needless sorrows which encompass poor humanity.'

'I do not know, Gertrude. It seems plain enough to me. The Bible says, "As ye sow, so shall ye reap." Whatever sorrow may be mine, I have myself alone to blame for it. I might have been to-day the happy wife of a good and noble man, but my pride stood in my way.'

'You are right,' admitted Lady Lundie again. 'During

the past year I have abundantly proved the hollowness of what the world calls her highest gifts. High position and a noble name are too often synonymous with arrogance and deadly pride; and I have concluded that, though there are some beautiful exceptions, the happiest state is that in which there is neither riches nor poverty, but a mediocrity of usefulness and worldly prosperity.'

'I cannot understand yet how you did not win your husband's heart so completely that he could be nothing but generously kind to you,' said Caroline presently, expressing a thought which had often troubled her. 'All who come in contact with you love you.'

Lady Lundie shook her head.

'I wronged my husband when I married him, not loving him. Nothing could atone for that. He knew it from the first, and it was a perpetual shadow between us, darkening even our happiest moments. His nature was suspicious and jealous, and he did not believe that it was possible I might in time learn to love him. Another thing I have often thought, though it seems unkind to say it—I believe Elizabeth came between us. It was a mistake from the beginning to have her an inmate of our home. I could not steer my way very well between them. Trying to keep peace with both I entirely missed the way, and at length grew careless, thinking it was impossible my husband would ever believe in the earnestness of my desire to fulfil in the spirit and in the letter my marriage vow. Perhaps when he comes back, if, indeed, I live to see that time, the past may be forgotten, and opportunity granted for the beginning of a new life based upon our faith in each other. That, at least, is my present hope.'

'God grant that it may be fulfilled, my dearest,' said Caroline, with a strange impulsiveness.

'Let us go in now,' said Gertrude, after a moment's silence, during which her eyes wandered across the wide stretch of landscape intervening between Castle Lundie and her old home. 'This talk has done me good. What an inestimable comfort it is to me to have you with me!' she added, and they turned to go.

'I hope we have not lingered here too long,' said Caroline anxiously, observing her sister shiver slightly, and draw the

'During

folds of her wrap more closely about her throat. 'The air is unusually chilly this morning, and in our talk we stood still instead of moving about.'

'It *is* chilly. I may have caught a slight cold,' Gertrude answered. 'I have always been susceptible since I caught a severe chill after an assembly in London last spring, but I daresay it will be nothing.'

Lady Lundie had evidently caught another chill, for when evening came she was quite feverish and ill, and the following morning Mrs. Franklin-Mayne despatched a groom for Doctor Dunsyre. It was a great and boundless satisfaction to Mrs. Mayne to reside at Castle Lundie, to be waited on by men-servants and women-servants, and to have no whim or fancy unfulfilled. It was indeed the life after her own heart. At noon Doctor Dunsyre's gig entered the Castle gates for the first time since he commenced practice in Rumford. His politics had made him obnoxious to Sir William, and when any medical attendance was required at the Castle, Dr. Pitcairn, a practitioner in the neighbouring town, had been sent for. Doctor Dunsyre was immediately shown up to Lady Lundie's dressing-room, where he found her lying on a couch near the fire. She turned and stretched out her hand with the bright, familiar smile of yore.

'I am glad to see you, Doctor Dunsyre. You see I have not been taking good care of myself,' she said frankly.

'I see that,' he answered cheerily; 'but I used to have some skill when you were concerned, Lady Lundie. You have caught a feverish cold, probably in going out in thin shoes, a very prevalent habit with my lady patients.'

'You are right; that's exactly what I did, Doctor Dunsyre,' she said, smiling. 'I place myself in your hands. Oh, I know all you are going to say! Just sit down first, and tell me all about everything. How is Margaret?'

'Margaret is always well. She does credit to my skilful supervision,' he answered, and drew in his chair, nothing loth, for a talk with his old friend.

He had never forgotten his former admiration and respect for Gertrude Mayne. He knew a great change in her. The round, fresh, girlish face, with its lovely bloom, had grown thin and worn, and the innocent eyes were surrounded by

deep shadows; also the sweet lips drooped a little at the corners, telling that they had not smiled much these many months. But there was a refined and exquisite grace, a strange and pathetic charm, about her which Gertrude Mayne had never possessed. Keen student of human nature as he was, David Dunsyre read these signs correctly, and could have truly told the story of her experience as a wife.

They were talking cosily, both enjoying it to the full, when the door opened and Caroline entered. Had she been aware of Doctor Dunsyre's presence in the room, it is needless to say she would not have appeared. Gertrude, watching keenly, saw a swift look cross the proud, pale face as she returned Doctor Dunsyre's bow with one as courteous, but as stiff as his own. Then she glided round to the other side of the couch, adjusted with gentle hand the invalid's wraps, and turned towards the window.

Doctor Dunsyre did not resume his seat, nor did Lady Lundie press him to do so.

'It is Caroline you ought to scold, Doctor Dunsyre,' she said, as he held out his hand at parting. 'She it is who tempts me out of doors. It is so exquisite for us to be together again; we have been parted so long.'

The Doctor bowed. What answer could he make to such a speech? Caroline, seeing he waited, turned from the window and expressed her readiness to show him down-stairs.

'There is nothing seriously the matter with Lady Lundie, I hope?' she said, detaining him a moment in the hall.

'Nothing. With care and attention she will speedily recover,' he answered. 'As I have not seen Mrs. Mayne, will you kindly see that my directions are carried out?'

'I will. Good morning, Doctor Dunsyre,' said Caroline, in a low voice, and, to his astonishment, she held out her hand. He took it a moment in his own, and the touch thrilled him as it had done of yore. He had deceived himself, indeed, for the old love was not dead in his heart. At sight of that beautiful face it flashed into new and passionate life.

'Good morning, Miss Franklin-Mayne,' he said, in tones which his supreme effort made cold as ice. He took his hat from the stand, opened the door, and abruptly left the house. And it was remarked by several of his patients that day that

the Doctor was not quite himself. Although the prescribed directions were carefully carried out, Lady Lundie's recovery was not so speedy as Doctor Dunsyre had predicted, and his daily attendance was necessary at Castle Lundie. Sometimes he saw Caroline, and when she did not appear he hated himself for the feeling of keen disappointment it caused. Watching her keenly, he could not but be struck by the change in her, as marked in its way as that visible in Lady Lundie. But it was not a physical change; it was only a gentleness of look and tone, a gleam of tenderness in the proud eyes, a sweet pathetic curve in the perfect lips, which the man who so passionately loved her had never seen before. The meaning of these things never for a moment struck him. He had fancied her refusal of him and his love a thing so absolute as to admit of no recall. At the end of a week he was on friendly terms with her, and their talk extended to other subjects than the sick-room and its dear inmate. Lady Lundie watched these two with an interest almost painful in its intensity. But she was too wise to say anything to either, only she would have given much to know whether there was any truth in the rumour concerning Miss Carter of Craigerook. The desire of her heart came to her one morning in a very unexpected way. Dr. Dunsyre had called as usual, and as she was progressing so favourably as to be able to sit up nearly all day, he had just said he would probably not be back for several days.

'Why not? I quite look forward to your visit, Doctor Dunsyre. If you are going to desert us altogether, I shall be sorry to get well,' said Lady Lundie, with a smile. David Dunsyre laughed, and unconsciously glanced at the queenly figure standing in the shadow of the rich hangings at the window.

'You must not encourage idleness, Lady Lundie. I am tempted to spend too much time here,' he said. 'But I cannot come to-morrow, as I am pledged to escort my aunt and cousin to town on a very interesting errand.'

'Indeed?' said Lady Lundie, and her eyes asked the question her lips did not.

'Probably you have heard the rumour of my cousin Ellen Carter's approaching marriage to my old friend and fellow-

student, Professor Laurence of Edinburgh?' he said. 'It takes place in the first week of April, and the ladies are going house-hunting, I believe, to-morrow.'

Doctor Dunsyre wondered to see the sudden radiance which overspread the face of Lady Lundie. Perhaps it was well he did not see also the deep, strange flush which overspread the face of the woman at the window.

'In that case we must excuse you. Pray convey to Miss Carter my sincere congratulations and good wishes,' said Lady Lundie. 'Must you go? but you will come back?'

'Once, perhaps, unless I hear any bad news. I can leave you in Miss Mayne's care now. She is the pattern of nurses. In the meantime, good-bye.'

They shook hands, and Caroline, as was her wont, turned to precede him down-stairs.

When she held out her hand to bid him good-bye he looked at her very keenly.

'I doubt *your* strength has been overtaxed. May I be permitted to prescribe absolute rest for you now, Miss Mayne?'

'For me? Oh, I am quite well,' she said, with the shadow of a smile.

'So you say; I do not think so,' he said grimly. 'Lady Lundie seemed surprised to hear of my cousin's approaching marriage. It has been the town talk of Rumford for weeks,' he added, simply to prolong these moments of dangerous yet exquisite sweetness.

'We had heard of it, but'—

'What?' he asked.

'Instead of your friend, it was yourself who was spoken of as the bridegroom,' she said nervously.

David Dunsyre's face flushed, and he buttoned his greatcoat close up to his throat.

'No, thanks. No man cares to be fooled more than once in his life. Miss Franklin-Mayne, good morning.'

Strong in his righteous indignation, he looked straight and clear into the lovely eyes fixed upon his face, then he deliberately opened the door of the little library, and they entered it together.

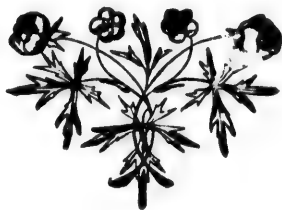
'I verily believe I have lost my senses, Caroline Mayne,' he said, folding his arms and speaking in a voice of curious calm.

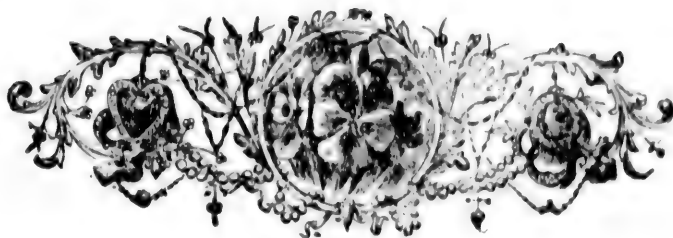
'Had any man told me an hour ago that I would sue twice to any woman, least of all to you, I would probably have knocked him down. I have tried to outlive my love for you, to crush it down with the memory of your contempt. It is proof of my utter failure that I stand before you again offering you my honest and unaltered love.'

Not a word fell from the pale lips of Caroline Mayne, but, trembling from head to foot, she took a step towards him. But he stood immoveable as a rock until the first faltering word passed her lips.

'Forgive'—

It was enough. With words of passionate love David Dunsyre took to his heart the only woman for whom he had ever cared. Because he loved much he forgave much. It was sufficient for him that he had won at last.





CHAPTER XVI.

BROTHER AND SISTER.

THAT day some of Doctor Dunsyre's patients waited for him in vain. Fortunately he had visited the more urgent cases on his way to Castle Lundie, else the consequences might have been serious.

Margaret took her lunch alone—no uncommon occurrence, however, for he was often away from dawn till dusk in these short winter days. About five o'clock she heard the familiar rattle of the gig wheels, so she would have his company to tea. He waited to hear from Sarah what messages had been left for him, and then came up to the drawing-room.

'You have surely had a busy day, David?' his sister said. 'How did you find Lady Lundie—better, I hope?'

'Yes, Lady Lundie is almost well,' he answered, and, striding over to the hearth-rug, he stood there in silence, looking down on Margaret's golden head bent over her work.

His sister was very dear to him; he had never met her equal, not even in Caroline Mayne, although he loved her with the love a man bestows on a woman he would make his wife. He was wondering in what words he would tell Margaret of this new element which had crept into his life—wondering how he was to say that another woman would some day soon supplant her in his heart and home. Presently she uplifted her fair face to his and smiled upon him.

'You are very quiet, David. Is any serious case troubling you?' she asked gently.

There were times when, weighed down with the cares and responsibilities of his profession, Doctor Dunsyre was seldom heard or seen in the house. These things took a very firm hold upon him, and there was no man more rigid in his conscientious performance of even the smallest professional duty.

'No, I have not troubled my patients very much to-day,' he said, with an odd smile. 'Will you put down your work a moment, Margaret, while I speak? I have something to tell you.'

She did so at once, her face betraying something of her surprise.

'You can't guess, I suppose?' he said.

She shook her head.

'How could I, not having the remotest idea of what nature your communication may be? Does it concern Lady Lundie?'

'No—at least very indirectly. I am going to be married, Margaret.'

Swift as an arrow to the mark, Margaret's thoughts flew to Lady Lundie's sister.

'To Caroline Mayne?' she asked, in a perfectly unreadable voice.

'You have said it,' he answered briefly.

Her eyes filled with tears, and her nervous fingers again sought their work. There was a moment's painful silence. At length she spoke again.

'Of course this is a surprise, perhaps a blow to me just at first, David,' she said, trying to speak cheerfully. 'That is but natural, seeing I have nobody in the world but you, and we have been together so long. But you believe, do you not, that I wish you every happiness? You deserve a good wife, because you have been the best of brothers to me.'

David Dunsyre was not a demonstrative man, rather the reverse. But at that moment he was deeply moved, and, bending down, he put his arm about his sister, and drew her very close to him.

'Bless you, Margaret. You have made a painful duty almost pleasant. I cannot speak of what you have been to me for years. It makes me feel that I am acting a little hardly and unjustly to you, and'—

'Oh, nonsense, David! Though we have been happy and comfortable together so long, I have never regarded myself as

a fixture here,' she said, with a little nervous laugh. 'It is a very foolish woman who will expect a brother to remain unmarried for her sake, however good a sister she may be to him. I have always wished you to marry, knowing perfectly well it would widen and increase your usefulness in your profession.'

'You are a noble woman, Margaret, and a thoroughly unselfish one as well,' he said warmly. Never had he so admired and loved her as he did at that moment. 'Are you pleased with my choice?'

'I know very little of Caroline Mayne, except that she is the most beautiful woman I ever saw,' she said. 'But you will forgive me if I say she is not the wife I would have chosen for you. But there! what sister is ever pleased with her brother's choice?'

'I think you will change your opinion when you know her, Margaret.'

'I hope and desire to do so. I will love her if she will let me, though I shall be a little afraid of her at first,' said Margaret calmly. 'Will you tell me one thing, David? How long have you been engaged to Miss Mayne?'

A comical smile touched the doctor's lips, and he took out his watch.

'Since about one o'clock to-day. Miss Mayne has been my promised wife for four hours.'

Margaret caught the humour and laughed too. She was well pleased that he had lost no time in telling her; it was a tribute as sweet as it was unexpected.

'Of course you are very fond of her, David? I fancy you are not a man to marry for anything but love.'

'I have cared for Caroline Mayne since the first time I saw her, three years ago. She is greatly changed since then. You will be the first to admit it,' he said, but wisely withheld from Margaret the fact of her first refusal of his love. He knew very well it would prejudice and perhaps harden his sister against her.

'Well, David, we will have plenty opportunities to talk this over. I suppose you will not be in haste to marry?' she said, rising and folding up her work.

'Oh no; there will be ample time, as you say. You can trust me to do what is right where you are concerned.'

'Surely. I know that I shall receive the utmost consideration at your hands, David. You have taught me to expect it,' she answered quietly.

'Margaret, I don't like to ask it; and yet, will you go to Castle Lundie with me soon—very soon?'

'Of course I will—to-morrow, if you like. I want you to believe, David, that there is no bitterness in my heart about this. If only I am convinced that Caroline Mayne is the wife for you, that she truly loves you, no one will more sincerely rejoice over your happiness than I.'

'God bless you, Margaret!' said the Doctor once more, deeply moved. 'It is women like you who preserve the old faith in the angel nature of womanhood.'

Margaret smiled a little, and stole away out of the room. In the solitude of her own chamber the bright, unselfish composure gave way, and the overcharged heart found vent. These tears were natural, and none could blame her for them. For it seemed to her that everything was slipping from her; even the home where all her life had been spent would soon be no longer hers. Ay, that was a dark hour for Margaret Dunsyre; but her nature, purified already by another sorrow, rose at length brave and heroic above this new trial, and she was enabled to look forward calmly, in perfect trust that the way wherein she should walk would be made plain to her feet.

Several days elapsed before Doctor Dunsyre claimed the fulfilment of his sister's promise to accompany him to Castle Lundie. She expressed her cheerful readiness to grant that request, and accordingly they drove the familiar way together one afternoon early in the following week.

Doctor Dunsyre had not prepared his betrothed for this visit, judging, perhaps wisely, that anticipation might have placed a restraint on their first meeting. The servant, seeing the lady with the Doctor, hesitated what to do. He could scarcely usher both into Lady Lundie's sitting-room. But Mrs. Mayne, hearing voices, came down-stairs, and relieved the awkwardness of the moment.

'How do you do, Doctor? You have brought your sister? Very kind indeed; and we are very pleased to see her,' she said, with her usual effusiveness. Then she kissed Margaret, somewhat to that damsel's discomfiture. 'Since we are to be

relatives, we must be friends first, I suppose,' she added, with a smile. 'Come away up to the drawing-room, and I will send for Caroline. I believe Lady Lundie will be able to come down to see you too.'

Doctor Dunsyre was a trifle annoyed. He would much have preferred Mrs. Mayne to be absent when his sister and his promised wife met for the first time. He was relieved to hear that she sent no message by the servant, however, except the simple request that she would come down to the drawing-room. Mrs. Mayne, however, restless and fidgety as of yore, did not wait for Caroline's appearance, but, with a smiling apology, ran to acquaint Lady Lundie with the arrival of the visitors. She was not many minutes gone when the door opened, and Caroline entered. She wore a gown of sweeping black velvet, which showed every curve of the exquisite figure to perfection. Her face, transfigured by the love in her heart, seemed to David Dunsyre ten thousand times sweeter than it had ever been before.

'My sister is here, Caroline. She has come to see you,' he said.

A deep flush overspread the beautiful face, and she drew somewhat hesitatingly back. Then Margaret approached her with a grace of manner exquisite to see.

'We must be friends, if we are to be sisters by and by,' she said, smiling, and took both the white hands in hers.

Caroline Mayne did not speak; but, with a swift gesture of humility and grace, she lifted one hand to Margaret's shoulder, and looked straight into her eyes. That look seemed to satisfy both; for they kissed each other then, and from that hour were friends for life. Presently Mrs. Mayne returned with Lady Lundie, and in the flow of happy greetings which followed, the last atom of restraint was swept away.

That night David Dunsyre wrote a long letter to John Strathearn, who was house-hunting in London preparatory to resuming his Parliamentary duties on the 28th of February. As was natural, that epistle glowed with happiness and bright hopes for the future. In contrast with the progress of John's own life, barren of all home-ties except his father's love, it was bright indeed. He read it through to the end, and then, folding his arms on the table, he leaned his head on them, and sat thus for many hours. There were times when

his heart grew sick within him, when his young manhood would cry out bitterly for all the lovely hopes and blessed realities which brightened the lives of his fellow-men. There was nothing for him but work, of which at times the soul of man grows weary unto death. It was the crucible of pain, indeed, through which John was passing. It has often appeared a mystery to me why the best of men seem to be chosen to bear life's heaviest burdens. It is one of those inexplicable tangles in the warp of life which will have its full unravelling by and by.

Lady Lundie's strength returned to her very slowly—so slowly, indeed, that Doctor Dunsyre was anxious, even alarmed about her. Fearing the bitter east winds which in March swept wildly over the hills and dales of the Border county, he strongly urged upon her the advisability of journeying by easy stages to Stoke Abbey. He believed that she would be in less danger from the fatigue of the change than she would be remaining a prisoner in Castle Lundie. He urged it upon her, even though he knew it would separate him from his darling—another proof of the Doctor's absolute unselfishness where professional duty was concerned. It was somewhat hastily decided to remove for the months of spring and early summer, at least, to Herefordshire; and in the second week of March the Castle was left to the care of a couple of servants.

Lady Lundie had received several letters from her husband, written on the voyage, and posted at the various ports at which they touched. But it was not until she reached the Abbey that a letter came conveying the intelligence of his safe arrival at Calcutta. It was evidently written in the best of spirits; but it saddened her somehow. Caroline wondered what it contained; for it was several days before her sister seemed quite herself again. Although sincerely rejoicing in Caroline's happiness, there were times when a kind of rebellious envy took possession of Gertrude's soul. Why were others so blessed, when she, a desolate, unloved wife, must bear such a heavy burden? A special gleam of sunshine to her heart was a brief visit Lady Leybourne paid to her in April, leaving London one afternoon, and returning next day. She brought the baby with her, eager in her motherly pride and delight to show what great things a year

had done for him. He was now sixteen months old, and could toddle unsteadily on his fat little legs, and was in every respect as fine a little fellow as you could wish to see. Lady Lundie, scarcely able to lift him in her fragile arms, looked at him with filling eyes.

'I envy you, Eleanor. If he were my son, I should not be so desolate as I am.'

'He would be a comfort to you, I know; and I have often wished to see an heir to Castle Lundie,' said Eleanor. 'But these things are not in our hands, and everything is wisely ordained for us. When are you coming to town? Grandmamma bade me specially inquire.'

'Not this year. Tell the Duchess, with my love, I fear my first season is likely to be my last.'

'Oh, nonsense, dear! You must not grow morbid and fanciful,' said Lady Leybourne. 'I was angry and vexed with William when I heard he had left you behind. I am doubly so now. It is the most extraordinary and unheard-of thing Wilfred and I have ever known.'

Lady Lundie held her peace. Not to her husband's sister, even though she was her best friend, would she whisper a suspicion of the truth, that it was the siren eyes of Sophia Devanha which had tempted him across the seas.

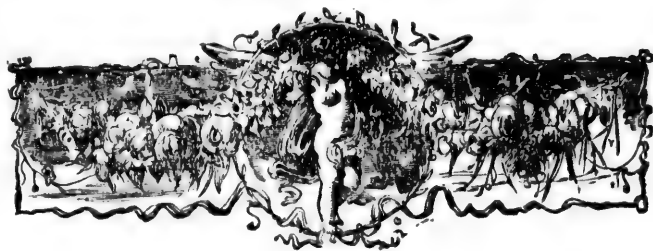
Lady Leybourne returned to town somewhat saddened by her visit. It was painful to her to witness the lonely sorrow which she was powerless to help.

At midsummer the ladies returned to Scotland, Lady Lundie apparently considerably improved in health. She had not heard from her husband by the last two mails, and was growing anxious in the extreme. She fancied somehow that news of him would reach her quicker at Castle Lundie. The first news came ominous and swift in the shape of a telegraphic despatch. It was addressed to Miss Franklin-Mayne, and had, of course, been brought at once to Castle Lundie. With trembling fingers Caroline tore open the envelope, and read the brief but fatal words,—

'Robert Bordillion,
Calcutta,

To Miss Franklin-Mayne,
Rumford, Scotland.

'Sir William Lundie died yesterday of fever. Letters follow.



CHAPTER XVII.

BEYOND RECALL.

A GREY and cheerless October day was nearing to a close. The sky was bleak and lowering; heavy masses of cloud hung low on the western horizon, boding a coming storm. The fields were bare and desolate; on the high roads and unkept bypaths the fallen leaves lay sodden underfoot. All nature seemed mourning over the departed summer.

Recent rains had swollen the Running Burn beyond its utmost limit, till it overflowed on the low-lying lands skirting its banks, and the footpath between it and the park at Meadowflats lay three inches deep in water. There was scarcely a leaf on the trees surrounding the old house, and the wintry wind wailed sadly through the naked boughs like a living thing in pain. Out of doors it was dreary indeed that October day, and the inmates of the house were glad to avert their eyes from the windows and keep close to the fire. In the drawing-room, towards the close of the afternoon, were Lady Lundie and her sister Caroline. You may wonder that they should be together again in the old house; but, during the past three months, one event had followed close upon another in Lady Lundie's life, and she had now practically no home save that which sheltered likewise her mother and sister.

It had turned out a blessing that Meadowflats had failed to find a tenant when it was advertised to let. The heir to Sir

William Lundie's title and estates—a scapegrace cousin, who had married beneath him—had made very indecent haste to claim his own, and had shown scant courtesy indeed to the young widow of his cousin. But she was as ready to go as they were anxious to see her quit the halls of Castle Lundie. She was so utterly prostrated, indeed, that it was a matter of little moment to her where or when she went. She was lying on the couch that afternoon, her fair cheek resting on her white hand, which showed in sharp contrast against the sombre folds of her widow's dress. She had been reading; but the book of poems had fallen unheeded to the floor. Caroline, sitting close by, busy with some sewing in which were woven many sweet and lovely hopes, thought she had fallen asleep, for her eyes were closed. But presently she stirred and looked up.

'I hear a carriage coming, Caroline. No visitors to-day, surely, unless it be David and Margaret,' she said. 'Doesn't it rain?'

'Very heavily. Yes; there is a carriage coming up the avenue,' said Caroline, turning to the window. 'The horses look uncommonly like the greys from Wilderhaugh.'

There was a new reign at Wilderhaugh as well as at Castle Lundie; but the new Earl and Countess were dear friends of the inmates of Meadowflats.

'Has mamma gone to lie down, Caroline?' asked Lady Lundie.

'Yes; but if it is Lady Devanha I will send Barrett to awake her, and have tea up immediately,' said Caroline; and at that moment the servant knocked at the door.

'Lady Devanha is in the library, Miss Mayne, and would like to see you for a few minutes,' she said.

Caroline looked much surprised.

'Would she not come up to the drawing-room, Mary? Is there a fire in the library?'

'No, ma'am,' said the girl, and was about to add something else, but Miss Mayne passed her, and ran lightly down-stairs.

When she entered the library, instead of the dainty, *petite* figure and laughing blue eyes of Lord Devanha's young and winsome wife, Caroline Mayne, to her inexpressible amazement, saw a tall, commanding figure, closely veiled, and robed in black from head to foot. At her entrance, however, the veil was lifted, and she recognised at once the familiar and beautiful

features of the Dowager-Countess, the late Lord Devanha's widow.

'You are doubtless surprised to see me, Miss Franklin-Mayne?' she said, without greeting of any kind. 'I have just arrived from India, and have come to see your sister, Lady Lundie. Can I see her?'

'Lady Lundie is in extremely delicate health, Lady Devanha,' answered Caroline. 'I fear a meeting with you would greatly agitate her. Unless you very particularly desire it, might I ask you to postpone your interview with her until she is a little stronger?'

Lady Devanha shook her head.

'I *must* see her, Miss Franklin-Mayne. I have brought home her husband's last messages, and, as I leave Scotland again to-morrow, I cannot postpone the interview. But I will willingly wait here till you have prepared her to see me.'

Still Caroline hesitated. She feared the sight of Lady Devanha, recalling as it must many painful memories, would prove too exciting to Gertrude's already over-strung nerves.

'Why do you hesitate?' asked Lady Devanha impatiently. 'The nature of my business with your sister is not likely to hurt her, but will rather calm and soothe her. Pray let her know at least that I am here, and give her the option of refusing to see me if she desires it.'

Caroline bowed, and returned to the drawing-room.

'Are you alone, Caroline?' asked Lady Lundie, in surprise. 'Has Amy gone away without coming to see me?'

Caroline came down to the couch and laid her hand caressingly on the sunny head.

'Gertrude, are you strong enough to bear a great and perhaps agitating surprise?' she asked a little hurriedly.

'Yes. What is it? Tell me it at once,' said Gertrude quietly, but with slightly heightened colour.

'It is not Amy who is here,' said Caroline then; 'it is the former Lady Devanha. She has just returned from India, and says she bears to you William's last messages. Will you see her?'

'Certainly. Let her come up at once,' Lady Lundie answered; but Caroline saw what a supreme effort it was for her to speak and act with calmness.

BEYOND RECALL.

'You will try and be calm, dear Gertrude. Remember how anxious I shall be,' she said, as she left the room.

She found Lady Devanha pacing restlessly up and down the library, apparently in a fever of impatience.

'Will she see me? May I go up now?' she asked eagerly.

'Yes, Lady Devanha. May I entreat you to remember my sister's lack of strength and extreme nervousness? Can I trust you not to agitate her needlessly?'

'I would not willingly hurt a hair of your sister's head, Miss Franklin-Mayne,' replied Lady Devanha. 'You may trust me to remember your request.'

Caroline opened the library door, and preceded the visitor up-stairs, leaving her at the drawing-room threshold with another entreating glance and a word of warning. Then she retired to wait with what patience she might the issue of the interview.

Lady Devanha opened the door, closed it again, and advanced swiftly up the long room to the couch where sat the woman she had come to see.

'I bid you welcome back to Scotland, Lady Devanha,' said Gertrude Lundie, and with frank courtesy extended her hand. But the haggard, dark-eyed woman, whose beautiful face was ploughed deep with the furrows of pain, shook her head, and slightly drew herself away.

'Not yet,' she said. 'Child, child, how changed you are! You look ten years older than you did when last I saw your face.'

'Will you be seated, Lady Devanha?' said Gertrude kindly.

'You look weary. You also are very much changed'—

'So they tell me. No, I will not sit down until I say what I have come to say. Your sister would tell you my errand here to-day?'

Gertrude bowed; and the momentary flush of excitement died out of her face.

'I promised her to be brief with what I had to say, so I will at once begin at the beginning. Probably you guessed long since that it was at my instigation your husband sought to return to India?'

Again Gertrude bowed.

'You knew, too, of course, that we were old friends there during the time he held office in Calcutta before. We were

more than that, Lady Lundie ; we were affianced lovers, and ought to have been husband and wife.'

She turned away then, and began to pace restlessly up and down the long room. She appeared to forget for a moment the presence of her listener. Gertrude shaded her eyes with her hand, and sat absolutely still.

'You have doubtless heard or read of a love which takes absolute possession of a woman's whole soul, changing the very current of her being. Such was the love which came to me when my first youth was past—such was the love I felt for William Lundie. I worshipped the very ground on which he trod. I would have laid down my life for him at any moment ; and when he asked me to be his wife I was delirious with happiness. The very nature and intensity of my love made me jealous ; and it was his delight to tease me, and try and torture me with his affected attention to others. Had his love equalled mine, of course such a thing would have been impossible for him ; but it wasn't in his nature to love another being better than himself. In a fit of passionate jealousy, roused by another love affair of his with which I need not now trouble you, I became engaged to Lord Devanha, married him at the end of six weeks, and came home with him to England. Although I was not happy I was at peace ; and I had everything which the heart of woman could desire, except one thing—the love which was the bane of my life. I heard of Sir William's return to England, of his marriage, and I came, as you must remember, to see you. When I looked upon your sweet face, and knew that you were by nature so far removed above me ; when I saw his devotion to you,—for he *did* love you in these days,—I hated you in my heart, and vowed I would make dispeace between you. I told myself I would spoil *his* dream of bliss as he had spoiled mine ; for your happiness or misery I cared nothing. I dropped poison into his ears, whispered to him that your heart was wholly given to another, though they had given your hand to him. I taunted him with your ignorance, your awkward school-girl ways and prudish notions, and made your very charms hateful to him. Before very long I had him in my power again ; the old sweet chains, all the sweeter because they were forbidden, bound us together. We lived

for each other, and for the time when a kind fate would make us free. It seemed as if we were to be favoured when my husband died. I will not speak of him, because his memory is the reproach and remorse of my waking hours, the haunting spectre of my dreams. Then I decided to go to India; and I whispered to him that it was in the hope that he would follow me, which he did, leaving you behind. My sister Lucy, Robert Bordillion's wife, who is as different from me as day from night, was shocked and pained when he arrived in Calcutta without you. And when she saw us constantly together,—riding, driving, boating alone, just as if no Lady Lundie existed, and as if we were betrothed as of yore, she took the law into her hands, and forbade him her house. She said to me she could not make me welcome to remain with her either, unless I ceased my wicked flirting with another woman's husband. Little I cared. I had thousands at my disposal, and I could provide a roof-tree for myself. However, things were unaltered, except that all our meetings were stolen; when, in the month of June, Sir William was seized with fever. Then my sister showed herself a true woman. She had him removed to her house, and nursed him with her own hands. I took part, but I was so prostrated with my agony of fear lest he should not recover, that I was of little use. It was during his illness, listening to his ravings, that I learned in how little estimation he held me. Your name was always on his lips. His tone and words breathed a deep and yearning love for you; he would entreat you to forgive him, he called you by every endearing name, and bemoaned his own utter unworthiness of the priceless treasure he had won. That was my punishment, Lady Lundie—greater almost than I could bear. The fever ran its course, and at length he opened conscious eyes upon the world. It was the hour of sunset, and I was watching in the room alone. He fixed his eyes on my face and spoke my name. In a moment I was by his side. He knew he had been long ill, and expressed to me his conviction that his hours were numbered. Then he laid upon me his dying charge. It was that I would journey to England and tell you the whole story. He charged me to convey to you his undying love, to say to you that he had discovered, when it was too late, the

value of his wife. He also bade me say that his dying wish and prayer was that no memory of him should stand in the way of your happiness, and that all the share he would crave in your future life was in your heart one kindly and forgiving thought. He thought it would not be very hard for you to grant his prayer, for you were ever the soul of angel goodness and unselfishness. That is my message, Lady Lundie. That is what I came here to-day to say.'

The calm, intense, passionless voice ceased, and the magnificent eyes looked down with mingled tenderness and compassion upon the golden head bowed low on the end of the couch. There was a moment's deep silence.

'Before I pass away from your sight for ever, Lady Lundie, I ask you,—though I have done you the greatest wrong one woman can do another,—I ask you to forgive me. Knowing you as I do, I am not afraid to crave even so much, because you are nobler than any woman I have ever met. One word to take with me to my solitude, and I am gone.'

Lady Lundie rose slowly to her feet. Her face, even in its absolute paleness, shone with the light of a generous and noble soul.

'Because of the unspeakable joy you have given to me to-day, even though it is mingled with bitterness, I forgive you, Lady Devanha, as I hope to be forgiven.'

She extended her hand once more. Lady Devanha raised it to her lips and left a tear upon it.

'Although I am a stranger to the language of prayer, Lady Lundie, I speak from a sincere heart,—God bless you and give you the happiness you deserve,' she said, and the proud, calm voice faltered now. 'Farewell.'

Lady Lundie would have detained her a moment, would have asked concerning her future life and plans, but in an instant she was gone. A few minutes later the whirl of the departing carriage told Caroline that the interview was at an end. In fear and trembling she stole to the drawing-room door and looked in. She saw her sister on her knees, and there was the sound of sobbing in the room. She shut the door again and stole away, knowing there was nothing to fear.

There could only be peace and healing in the first tears Lady Lundie had shed since her widowhood.



CHAPTER XVIII.

AT LAST.

AGAIN it was the summer-time, again leaf and flower were in fullest, loveliest bloom, again the song of bird and ripple of brook made music in the summer woods. At Meadowflats in these golden days Lady Lundie abode with her mother and sister, and it was a home where happiness and peace dwelt continually. The great fortune which at her husband's death had fallen to Lady Lundie, had relieved the mind of Mrs. Mayne for ever from all sordid cares. Then the constant companionship of Gertrude's sweet and wholesome nature had done much to tone down the mother's oddities of character, and she was improved in a thousand ways. The prospect of Gertrude's constant companionship had reconciled her to Caroline's marriage, for which, however, no definite time had been fixed. It was understood that on her brother's marriage Margaret should take up her abode permanently with Mrs. Carter, her widowed and now solitary aunt. Ellen's marriage had made a great blank at Craigcrook, which only Margaret, who resembled her closely in many ways, could adequately fill. Caroline, in the serenity and fulness of her contentment, was in no haste to marry, but Lady Lundie's quick eye detected in Doctor Dunsyre the desire of his heart to have his darling always by his side. She managed the affair in her own quiet way, without any one suspecting she was even interested in it. First

of all she spoke to Doctor Dunsyre. Knowing he was expected one evening at Meadowflats, she walked to the end of the avenue to meet him. He was on foot also, and when they met she turned down a little path which led by a roundabout way to the house.

'I came out on purpose to meet you, David, because I want to speak to you,' she said, with a smile. 'Will you let me appropriate ten minutes of your valuable time?'

'Surely,' said the Doctor readily, and looked with undisguised admiration at the bright, happy face, to which all the bloom and girliness of yore had returned.

'It is about your marriage I want to speak. How long are you going to wait? Are you not of age yet?'

'Rather; but what can I say to convince Caroline that my patience has a limit?' he asked good-humouredly.

'Well, David, I have quite decided that mamma and I are to winter abroad, probably at Nice or Mentone, and we want all the bustle of the marriage over first. Why should it not take place in September?'

'If I can convince Caroline of the expediency of the step, it shall take place then, Gertrude,' he answered promptly.

'Surely our combined efforts will win the day,' said Lady Lundie, with a sunny smile. 'And Margaret will help us. She is on our side, I know.'

'You are a very good friend to me, Lady Lundie,' said David, with a comical smile.

'Very. Not altogether disinterested, I fear. I think Caroline is waiting on my account. Of course we must miss her; but though she is your wife she will not be lost to us, David,' answered Lady Lundie, with full eyes.

'Surely not. I hope that, instead of thinking you have lost a sister, you will prove you have only gained a brother, Gertrude,' said the Doctor warmly.

'You have long been a brother to me, David,' said Lady Lundie frankly and truly. 'Well, here we are. Don't tell Caroline I spoke, mind, or she will take me to task.'

'Not a word,' laughed the Doctor.

Then Gertrude, leaving him to enter the house, continued her walk round to the stables, called Lion, and took him down for a dip in the burn.

Doctor Dunsyre did not find his betrothed very difficult to persuade. All she said in protest was that she must first speak to Gertrude. Knowing what the result of that would be, the Doctor was very well content.

'And now about our house, my darling. I have an idea in my mind. Wilder Grange is in the market; if you say the word I can purchase it at once. I fancy I would not like to take my wife to the old High Street house.'

Caroline was silent a moment, leaning her head on his arm.

'Do you not like the old house, David?' she asked.

'Of course I do. Wasn't I born in it? It would be a great change for me,' he said frankly. 'But my darling is first with me now, and, as I am more than able, why should I not make her the mistress of the Grange?'

'If you would let me, David, I would rather go home to the old house. I have a fancy that I should like just to step in there and make a part of the old life in the old home. I should not like to feel that in marrying me you must make such a sweeping change. I have no desire to be great or grand any more, David; that has gone away for ever, and it is enough for me that I am the happiest woman in the world.'

'My darling, it will be as you say, then, for a little while; but some day, when you have grown tired of the old house, we will look for another,' said the Doctor tenderly. 'You know now, my dearest, that every word you say is law to me.'

Ay, Caroline Mayne was changed, indeed, and Rumford would have cause to bless the day the Doctor brought his wife home to the High Street house.

As was natural, the Doctor asked John Strathearn to be groomsman at the quiet wedding to take place at Meadowflats in the first week of September, but to his disappointment and painful surprise his request was declined, without any reason being given. He was deeply hurt, so much so, indeed, that he neither wrote nor spoke of his marriage to John again. The time came, however, when he understood the reason of that refusal. But there was sent from Redlands a present for the bride, the loveliest and most costly of all her bridal gifts. It was a necklet and pendant of exquisite design and workmanship, set in every link with a diamond of the purest water. The pendant had her initials wrought in diamonds. A letter

accompanied it, conveying in a few manly words the writer's deep and heartfelt wishes for her happiness, and asking as a special favour that she would wear it on her wedding-day.

No quieter marriage had ever been known in Rumford, and many felt aggrieved that the greatest event in the popular Doctor's life should pass off with so little display. There were no strangers present, and Professor Laurence and his wife were the only relatives immediately outside the family circle. But the spirit of peace and love was there, and it was a union of hearts and lives as well as hands.

The newly-married pair went away for a week together to a southern watering-place, and then came home and very quietly took up their abode in the High Street house, just as if nothing unusual had happened. But the Doctor was more popular than ever, for his marriage had made him even brighter and cheerier than of yore.

In the first week of October Mrs. Mayne and Lady Lundie went to winter at Nice. Since her former illness Doctor Dunsyre always feared the east winds for Lady Lundie, and urged her to seek a warmer clime until the early spring was past. After their departure the winter dulness settled down on Rumford. The Doctor's wife missed her mother and sister, but she found a substitute in the ladies at Craigcrook, who often looked in upon her. Mrs. Carter was charmed with her nephew's choice, as was every one who met Caroline in her new character of a happy and idolized wife. John Strathearn came sometimes, as of yore, to see his friend, and was thoroughly at home with his lovely wife. But he was often dull and out of sorts, and it was a common remark with the Doctor that Strathearn was not the man he had been. He attributed it, however, to his father's failing health, the old gentleman being rarely able now to leave his bed. There was no disease, only the failing of physical organs consequent upon extreme age. But the faculties remained clear and unclouded still, and, as is sometimes the case, his mental vision was keener than it had been in health. One afternoon towards the close of the year, father and son were alone together in the wide and pleasant chamber which the old master never now expected to quit in life. John had been reading to his father, but had laid his book aside, thinking the closed eyes

indicated sleep. He leaned his head on his hand and fixed his eyes on the fire. His attitude was one of extreme dejection, his expression weary and sad. Presently his father stretched out one hand and touched his arm.

'John, my dear lad.'

'Yes, dad. I thought you were asleep. Shall I go on?' he said, lifting his book.

'No; I want to speak to you. John, you have not been yourself for a long time, my lad.'

'Perhaps not. Under the circumstances it is but natural, father,' John made answer quietly.

'My lad, I know what is the matter, and I am going to speak very plainly,' said the old man, with a slight smile.

'All right, dad. That has always been your habit,' said John, with an answering smile.

'You are fretting after the woman you love, my lad,' said the old man. 'She is free. Why not try your fortune again?'

John sprang to his feet. He did not imagine his father's penetration would be so unerring still.

'What of that? I must just fret and begin again. *That* is out of the question,' he answered gloomily.

'Why, it is only pride that is keeping you back, John.'

'Perhaps you are right. But she is the widow of a baronet, and inherits a great fortune in her own right,' he said. 'You know what the world would say of me.'

'The world!' repeated the old man, with mild scorn. 'My lad, I always gave you credit for common sense. Would you spoil both your lives for such a punctilio? If all I hear of Lady Lundie be true, she is worthy even of you. Go and take my blessing with you. I would like to kiss your wife once before I die, and to fall asleep at last, knowing you would not be left alone in this desolate home.'

John, standing in the window, with his back to the bed, felt the blood leap in his veins. His pulses thrilled, his heart throbbed at the very thought. He had but needed this; one word was enough to set all the current of his being towards one object. He turned to his father at length, and gripped his hand like a vice.

'I will do as you say, father. At the worst I shall but be

where I was before,' he said ; and the old man rejoiced to see something of the old fire and resolution in his son's honest eye.

That night John Strathearn rode into Rumford, and, leaving his horse with a lad on the street, knocked at the Doctor's door, and asked for Mrs. Dunsyre. He was shown up to the familiar drawing-room, which was more magnificent than it had been in old days, having been entirely refurnished for the young wife. She rose from her chair, a womanly and graceful figure in sweeping black silk, and expressed as usual her true pleasure to see the visitor.

'Sit down, Mr. Strathearn,' she said pleasantly. 'David will not be many minutes. He was sorry to miss you yesterday, but there is a good deal of distress in the town, and he is much occupied.'

'No, thanks, I will not sit down. I don't want to see David to-night,' he said, with the most unusual abruptness of manner and speech. 'Mrs. Dunsyre, will you be so good as to give me Lady Lundie's address in Nice?'

In the greatness of her astonishment Caroline for a moment stood absolutely still, staring at the resolute face of the man before her. Then, with a tremulous smile rippling about her perfect lips, she turned aside and unlocked her davenport.

'It is Villa Froebelle, I think, but I am not quite sure of the name of the lady with whom they are boarding. Ah, here it is,—"Madame St. Maron, Villa Froebelle, Nice,"' she said ; and, lifting her scissors from her work-table, she cut the address from the letter and handed it to him. He put it in his pocket-book before he spoke.

'Thank you. I am going there to-morrow ; doubtless you can guess upon what errand. Good-night and good-bye, Mrs. Dunsyre.'

'Good-bye. May I wish you God-speed, Mr. Strathearn?' asked the young wife tremulously. 'Believe me, I have often wished for this, rightly or wrongly I cannot tell.'

'Nor I ; but your earnest wish sends me on my way with a better heart,' he said, and raised the white hand reverently to his lips. When Doctor Dunsyre came in he found his wife apparently in a brown study.

'Mr. Strathearn has been here, David,' she said.

'And where is he now? What does the fellow mean by appearing and disappearing in that fashion? I am afraid it must be you he comes to see,' quoth the Doctor, in his off-hand way.

'It certainly was me he came to see to-night. He is going to Nice to-morrow, David.'

Doctor Dunsyre favoured his wife with a prolonged stare, and then gave vent to his feelings in a long, low whistle.

'It's in the air, my darling. I told you our example would be followed. It will be Margaret next,' he said. 'So that's what's been the matter with Strathearn this long time, and I was too much of an ass to see it.'

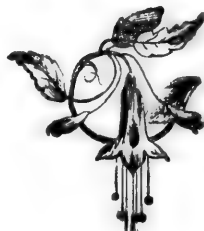
The young master of Redlands left Rumford by the first train the following morning, reaching town in time for the ten o'clock Midland express. On the afternoon of the second day he arrived in Nice. He had never been in the favourite health resort before, and he marvelled at the blue skies and balmy air, and thought it strange indeed to see the gardens gay with flowers at Christmas-time, remembering the bare boughs and barren hedgerows he had left at home. These thoughts only flitted through his mind, engrossed as it was, however, by one absorbing hope. He dined and refreshed himself at the Hôtel d'Angleterre, and then set out leisurely to find the Villa Froebelle. Now that he was so near, he felt no immediate haste to learn his fate. After half an hour's walk and some questioning, he found the place, a sweet and desirable retreat in one of the loveliest suburbs of the town. The house stood in a wide and pleasant garden, and commanded an exquisite peep of the blue and shimmering sea. He entered the rustic gate, walked up the trim path, and knocked at the open door. The most dainty of maidens answered his appeal, and, in response to his request for Lady Lundie, violently nodded her head, smiling and gesticulating all the time. Understanding that she desired him to enter, he followed her through the cool, pleasant hall and into a front *salon*. He heard the rustle of a dress in the adjoining room, a swaying curtain was swept aside by a white hand, and they were face to face. There was a moment's intense, painful silence. Involuntarily both took a step towards each other.

'Am I welcome, my darling?' John said hoarsely, and the dawning light on the lovely face did not say him nay.

A bird trilling noisily on a rose branch at the window ledge suddenly stilled his song, the whispering breeze stirring the leaves seemed to hold its breath, there was a great and solemn hush of expectancy in the flower-laden air. But it passed, and, mingling with the renewed music of the stirring outside world, were the whispered words he caught,—

'John, John, why did you stay so long?'

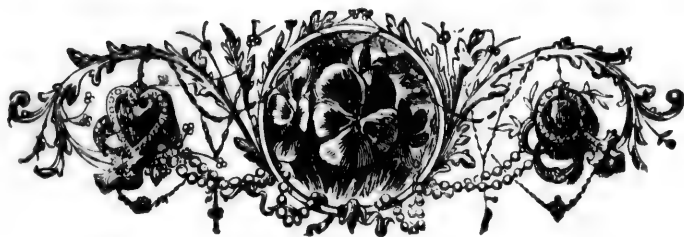
And so love, strong, beautiful, and free, bound these sundered hearts once more.



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CONCLUSION.

THE old master lived to hold his son's wife in his arms, and to see the sunshine of a woman's presence in Redlands once more. They were married before the year was out, and their first Christmas was spent at home among all the old friends. Before the reassembling of Parliament the old master fell asleep, with his daughter's hand in his, and her name the last upon his lips. A month later John and his wife went to London, to their town house in Prince's Gate. The world had its say, of course, concerning Lady Lundie's second marriage, and for a time the tongue of society wagged very freely. Both were censured by those who, out of envy or bitterness of soul, grudged them the happiness they so richly deserved. Elizabeth Lundie elected to be bitterly displeased and scandalized. Needless to say, she broke off all connection with her former sister-in-law, and declined to visit her. But with such names as the Duchess of St. Roque, the Countess of Leybourne, and many others as noble, on her visiting-list, Lady John Strathearn could very well afford to dispense with Miss Lundie's countenance. Her best friends rejoiced sincerely at her happiness, and paid both her and her honoured husband every attention.

Her first season as Lady Strathearn was necessarily very quiet. But with such a home she needed no gaiety. Of its happiness I cannot write, because my pen is too weak.

Lady Devanha did not appear again in English society. She took up her residence in Westbrook Hall, and there abides in solitude. It is said she devotes her life to doing good with her wealth. Mrs. Mayne is still to the fore. Meadowflats is nominally her home, but she divides her time between the High Street house and Redlands, where she is equally welcome. She is a grandmother now to Caroline's first-born son, but as yet no heir has been born to Redlands.

Doctor Dunsyre's prediction regarding his sister had an early and unexpected fulfilment. Visiting her cousin Ellen in Edinburgh, she met at her house a famous London physician with a title to his name, and who numbered royalty among his patients. And, greatly to the surprise of his many friends, the well-known physician, in course of time, brought home a Scotch wife. So Margaret found her happiest sphere at last, and her marriage forged a firm link between the English capital and the Border town.

Perhaps Redlands is the happiest of these three happy homes, because the pair had reached their blessedness through much tribulation.

The member for —shire is one of the most able and eloquent speakers in the House. He is spoken of as a rising statesman, and his labours point to a seat in the Cabinet. His wife is one of the most popular ladies in society, and is his true helpmeet in every way. The bitterness of the past is swallowed up in the happiness of the present, and her former married life seems almost like the shadow of a dream. But is it not through sorrow that we reach the higher heights of bliss? Is it not the darkness which comes before that makes so sweet the breaking of the day?

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